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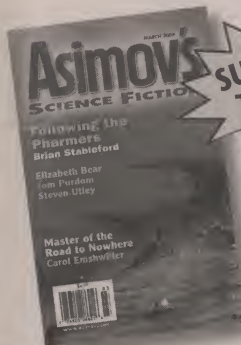
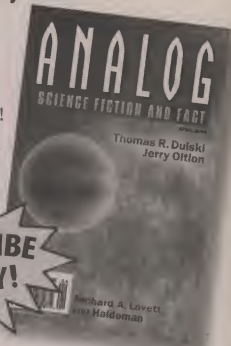
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SEND IN THE RIGHT REVIEWER

It's an acknowledged truism that it is pointless to argue with professional critics. Once they've made up their minds about a movie, a book, a play, or a short story, it's highly unlikely that you will disabuse them of their notions. Whether or not you or I agree with their assessment of a work, they will usually have cogent reasons for their opinions. Engaging in counter argument will likely lead to humiliation when they bring the hammer down and finally reveal to you their *real* opinion of the work in question. I take the advice not to quibble pretty seriously, but there are times when I rather wistfully wonder why a magazine or a newspaper can't be more merciful to their reviewers. Why not ask someone who enjoys genre fiction to review the latest big-budget sci-fi film? Why not give the fantasy buff the newest three-volume trilogy?

In 1979, *TIME* magazine's noted film critic Richard Schickel must have thought he'd drawn the short stick when he was sent to review the first *Star Trek* movie. He was unhappy with the language, "[T]here is a lot of talk. Much of it in impenetrable spaceflight jargon. Scanners, deflectors, warp speed. . ."; referred to many of those who had enjoyed the original TV show as "the half-educated"; and completely misinterpreted the opening sequence of the film, describing it this way: "It turns out that the villainous UFO is not manned. This is very peculiar, since in the film's opening sequence it is full of weirdos [sic]. By the time the *Enterprise* closes in on it, the creatures have all disappeared, victims not of the story line but of what appears to be a shortage of either money or time."

Mr. Schickel was entitled to his ultimate opinion that *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* was "nothing but a long day's journey into ennui." Indeed, it was not the most exciting SF film I'd ever seen, but my "half-educated" friends and I—all philosophy graduate students at Wash-

ington University in St. Louis—agreed that we would have gotten more from the review if *TIME* had chosen to send a critic who had actually enjoyed the TV show, wasn't afraid of the vocabulary, knew a more descriptive term for "Klingons" than "weirdos," and could figure out that rather than piloting V'Ger, the aliens and their spaceship were under attack and then destroyed by the "UFO" during the movie's first scene. The reviewer didn't have to like the movie. Confusion and boredom are legitimate reactions to any film, but one gets the sense that Mr. Schickel may have attended the screening of a *Star Trek* film under protest.

More than thirty years have gone by and as far as fantasy and SF films go, most news outlets seem to have either gotten better at assigning the right reviewers or perhaps find that a higher percentage of their critics grew up on and now enjoy watching genre films. Even Mr. Schickel seems to have found some of the later *Star Trek* films easier to endure. Reviewers like Richard Corliss, A. O. Scott, and Manohla Dargis, routinely extol the virtues of genre films that catch their fancy. Still, that doesn't mean that today's news outlets always manage to match the right reviewer to the work.

One of the most egregious examples of a mismatched pairing has got to be the New York *Times* decision to ask Ginia Bellafante to review HBO's ten-part series based on George R.R. Martin's blockbuster fantasy novel, *A Game of Thrones*. Ms. Bellafante doesn't directly refer to the intended audience as "half-educated," but she does question whether the show's subject matter could possibly appeal to half the world's population because she doesn't know a single woman who is interested in reading fantasy. (I have the impression that she may never have met any that read science fiction, either.) In her review, Ms. Bellafante shows herself to be very uncomfortable with alien

world building. Echoing Mr. Schickel, she's also unhappy with the show's vocabulary and she asserts her superiority over role-playing gamers in the usual obligatory manner of many popular culture critics. She sums up her feelings toward *A Game of Thrones* this way: "If you are not averse to the Dungeons & Dragons aesthetic, the series might be worth the effort. If you are nearly anyone else, you will hunger for HBO to get back to the business of languages for which we already have a dictionary."

I have no argument with Ms. Bellafante's opinion of the show. It didn't work for her, and that's fair. It's her job to tell us what she thought. I don't subscribe to HBO and haven't watched the series so I haven't formed my own opinions about it. Still, I am in agreement with a commenter who posted on the *Times*' website, "I don't want a rabid fan as a reviewer, but the writer should be somebody who at least likes similar shows, movies, and books (a.k.a. somebody who would actually buy a ticket to the Lord of the Rings)."

Ms. Bellafante was inundated with so many cries of protest that she posted a follow-up essay wherein she described herself as a stand-in for the non-fantasy viewer. As such, she may have provided a useful service for that subset of television watchers, but a lot of those spectators probably self-selected themselves out of *A Game of Thrones*' audience even before they read her review.

Those who could have benefited most from the review—the millions who enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, as well as *Avatar*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and perhaps even *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*—would have learned more from an essay by someone who wasn't afraid to occasionally step outside the everyday world of *House* and *The Sopranos*—someone who wasn't discomforted by the language, the world building, and the unusual inhabitants that are often the *sine qua non* of fantasy and science fiction. Undoubtedly, I wouldn't have agreed with everything this imaginary reviewer had to say about the program, but at least I would have known that he or she had attended the screening willingly and not just for the popcorn. ○

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A WRITER'S DIARY

I've never kept a diary, which I often regret when I try to reconstruct the details of some event of my early life. (Isaac Asimov kept one, and it stood him in good stead when he wrote a huge two-volume autobiography, another thing I've never felt the urge to do.) But people often ask me what the life of a science fiction writer is like, since they find the idea that I have put in more than fifty years writing SF very strange indeed. (I don't. I'm used to it.) So, just for the fun of it, a few diary-like notes on my life as a writer in the early weeks of 2011.

January 11. A newspaper article today about the discovery by archaeologists of what seems to be a six-thousand-year-old winery in Armenia. A column idea here? The ancient past is almost as science-fictional as the future, after all. And I do like wine. Put this aside to think about.

January 15. My birthday. We go to one of our favorite San Francisco restaurants, and I bring along a bottle of one of my favorite wines. The sommelier, as she pours it, says "Welcome back." Does she remember us from our last visit? We have been seated right opposite the kitchen door; she notices that I don't like it, and arranges for us to move to a better table. Later she brings us an extra course, and then some additional wine. It turns out that she reads SF and loves *Lord Valentine's Castle*, and indeed remembers me from my last visit here. Wants to talk about my current work—I tell her that I've just written a new Majipoor story—and about my neighbor Jack Vance. It becomes a delightful evening, thanks to her extra attention. I'll send her a signed copy of my newest book; it's the least I can do.

January 18. First copies of *Musings and Meditations*, the new collection of

Asimov's columns published from 1996 to 2010, arrives. They've done a handsome job with it. I start leafing through it and find myself reading my own columns with deep interest, even pleasure. The book, I think, is more than the sum of its parts, not just a bunch of scattered essays but a work that projects a coherent world-view. I hope the critics agree.

January 19. Sheila Williams sends me a link to her new anthology, *Enter a Future*, made up of stories from Asimov's. It contains my "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another." I love to see the rows of anthologies on my shelves here, going back more than fifty years, with my stories in them. But I will never see this one: it is available only in an electronic edition. Oh, well. I'll get along without it. I tell Sheila that I'm an old-fashioned guy but I'm doing my best to adapt to the current century.

January 20. Filing some of my Russian editions that a new correspondent in St. Petersburg has sent me. In Soviet days the Russians pirated dozens of my novels and stories, and the piracy went on into the early and wild post-Soviet days. For years I've been trying to collect copies of them, hampered by the difficulty I have reading Cyrillic script. An Amazon-like Russian bookselling site called *Ozon.ru* lists 129 different Silverberg items, and, scrolling through, I see that I already own about half of them. But some are new to me and aren't even included in the bibliography of my Russian publications that the Polish scholar Zyta Szymanska compiled for me two years ago. With the help of Google's translation function I manage to identify one of them: an attractive book from 1994 that couples my early novel *The Seed of Earth* with L. Sprague de Camp's *The Tower of Zanid*. It's in Russian, but it was pub-

lished, I discover, in Estonia, which in Soviet times was forced to use Russian as its primary language. I'll be in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, in May. Maybe I can find a copy there, or in St. Petersburg, which I'll also be visiting.

January 24. I've closed a deal for U.S. electronic rights to my ten-volume Collected Short Stories series and the first five volumes will be available on Kindle later this week. (Malcolm Edwards' Orion Books has already acquired British e-rights.) This is very exciting news. Bill Schafer's Subterranean Press has done a beautiful job with this series, but he's done them only as limited-edition hardcover books that go quickly out of print and become collector's items. Now, though, Malcolm and Bill will be making them permanently available in e-versions, and thus, with a little help from my friends, I acquire a twenty-first-century platform for my work. So long as I'm still around, I want my books and stories to stay around also, and Kindle and its competitors have gone from being interesting science fictional novelties to being absolutely essential media for the writer who wants his work to survive.

January 25. Got a fast start on the short story I've promised for Gardner Dozois' book in honor of Poul Anderson. I agreed to write a Time Patrol story for it, and so I was rereading Poul's splendid series all last week to refresh my memory of his concept. (I am staying away from my own *Up the Line*, which in some ways was a parody of the Anderson series.) Had a lot of trouble working out the resolution of the plot for this one, because once you give all your characters the ability to move freely in any direction in time and space, it's like giving them all magic wands, and any plot resolution can too easily be canceled out by someone else's opposing move. But I think I have it nailed down. We'll see next week.

Feb 1. I seem to have finished the Time Patrol story pretty rapidly, with a ten-page flourish on the final day that harkens back to the wildly prolific days of my youth. Rough draft, of course. I

need to read through it carefully and see whether it make sense, now. But I think it does. Gardner will be pleased.

Another Gardner Dozois item today. Sean Wallace of Prime Books has asked me to do an introduction to a collection of Gardner's stories that he's publishing to be distributed at Readercon next summer, where Gardner is guest of honor. This will be the third time since 1977 that I've done an introduction to one of Gardner's story collections. Can I find anything new to say about him? Well, if not, I'll say the same old things. They were good enough to use the first two times around.

Feb 2. From Vince Gerardis comes the outline for the pilot show for the miniseries HBO is planning to make out of *The World Inside*. I'm pleased to see that the screenwriter has remained completely faithful to the concepts of my novel while introducing some interesting and appropriate new plot twists. If the show does get made—and in Hollywood that's always uncertain until the cameras finally start rolling—it should be terrific, a sexy *Blade Runner* sort of thing that attracts a wide audience.

Vince has been my agent for film rights for a decade or more, as smart and aggressive as you would want your agent to be, but never before has he had so many different Silverberg projects going. If even half of them materialize as movies or TV shows, I'll be all over the place a few years from now. But I know better than to put much faith in the likelihood that Hollywood stuff will actually happen. Most projects disappear somewhere along the way—even *Dune* came and went half a dozen times before finally being filmed.

Also some documents from Vince pertaining to the proposed filming of my 1968 story "Passengers." It was bought for filming a dozen years ago, but the movie was never produced, and somehow Vince has regained the rights and sold them all over again. Nice. I wonder if they'll manage to make it this time around.

Feb 3. And now my New York agent, Chris Lotts, closes a deal with Tor Books

for a reissue of my 1971 novel, *Downward to the Earth*. I wrote that one after coming back from a trip to Africa, so it's not surprising that one of its main themes is post-colonial life, and that it features a race of intelligent elephant-like beings. It includes a significant bit of homage to Joseph Conrad, a writer who has had great influence on me—the first of many Conrad homages of mine. (In this one I tip my hat to *Heart of Darkness*.) I'm glad to see the book returning to print. Chris tells me that another, much bigger reissue deal is in the works, but nothing is definite yet. My fingers are crossed for this one.

These past few weeks have been very busy, all sorts of deals happening and even more pending. I'm not unhappy about that, of course, but so much action is starting to tire me—dozens of e-mails buzzing back and forth between various publishers and me, discussions with my agents Chris and Vince, terms to haggle over, contracts to sign! Poor me! I guess there are worse problems for a writer to have. My teenage self, who so desperately wanted to get a story published anywhere he could, would surely find all this self-pity very amusing. But I haven't been a teenager for close to sixty years and fatigue is an issue for me, even when caused by torrents of good news. That ambitious kid of 1952 would never understand.

Feb 6. A glorious California weekend, record-breaking warm temperatures. On Saturday we saw the new London production of *King Lear* with Derek Jacobi, one of those worldwide theater telecasts. I spent much of sunny Sunday reading a biography of Georges Simenon. The juxtaposition of Lear and Simenon had me considering the concept of retirement, theirs and mine (because I am semi-retired as a writer and constantly thinking about deleting the "semi").

Lear bungled his retirement, angrily and foolishly alienating his one ally as he gave up his kingship, and undergoing terrible suffering as a result. His rough and ultimately self-destructive treatment of Cordelia made me wonder whether he was already beginning to lose his mind when he abdicated, rather than (as I had long thought) going mad under the pressure of the events that followed. As for Simenon, he and I had very similar writing careers, the one difference being that he became vastly more famous and wealthy than I did. But we both began writing professionally in our late teens, enormously prolific writers quickly turning out reams of copy for pulp markets, then began to produce more ambitious material in our thirties, and, in our late sixties, gave up writing novels altogether. (Simenon, in fact, stopped writing fiction entirely, though he spent his last years writing a series of memoirs. I've done no novels in the past decade, but I've continued to write short stories and the occasional novella.) Do even the most prolific writers eventually reach a point where they'd just like to kick back and let the new generation take over? Simenon did in 1972. I've been feeling that way since about 2002. At least he made a better job of his retirement than Lear did. I hope I do.

Anyway, it's been a busy few weeks—unusually busy. I hope these notes don't give the impression that every day of the year brings me some new contract to sign, as it has seemed since mid-January. Believe me: there are lulls, plenty of them. But this has certainly been an active time, and it's time to take things a little easier. So off we go on a little holiday, now—a few days down in San Diego, enjoying that city's lovely weather and prowling its marvelous zoo in search of wombats and koalas. And then I'll see what March holds for me. ○



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STEAMED

ours and theirs

Haven't we seen this once before? Back in the early eighties, a group of young and ambitious writers leapt out of the back seat of science fiction and gave the genre's steering wheel a hard jerk to one side, sending us careening into cyberspace. For a time cyberpunk was our secret, although given the caterwauling it evoked in genre from its partisans and critics, it wasn't much of one. But by the end of the decade, cyberpunk was no longer a literary movement but also a lifestyle, a fashion statement, and something of a fad. It spawned movies and TV shows and comics and video games and jewelry; for some mirrorshades and leather were the uniform of the day. It was no longer ours, it was theirs, too. Anyone could take whatever they wanted from it.

At roughly the same time, steampunk was stirring. Just as cyberpunk had a core group of writers which included such central figures as **Bruce Sterling** <wired.com/beyond_the_beyond> and **William Gibson** <williamgibsonbooks.com>, among steampunk's founders were **Tim Powers** <www.theworksoftimpowers.com> and **James Blaylock** <sybertooth.com/blaylock> and **K. W. Jeter** <kwjeter.com>. Of course, steampunk had a much slower takeoff. Jeter is generally credited with coining the name in a letter to the editor published in **Locus** <locusmag.com> that concerned itself with what to call the nascent subgenre:

Personally, I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing, as long as we can come up with a fitting collective term for

Powers, Blaylock, and myself. Something based on the appropriate technology of that era; like "steampunk," perhaps . . .

(**Science Fiction Citations** <jessesword.com/sf/view/327>, an otherwise wonderful resource for genre jargon, cites a later interview with Blaylock as the first usage. Perhaps a correction is in order?) Since Jeter's letter appeared in April 1987, his prediction was off by as much as a generation, although in 2011 it has come to pass with a vengeance. It's interesting that Jeter was also a cyberpunk of note, and there has ever been entanglement between the two great *punk* subgenres, starting with their names. Steampunk has a note of whimsy that was lost on the first cyberpunks, who were earnestly fomenting literary revolution. Yet in 1990, Gibson and Sterling's novel *The Difference Engine* helped popularize steampunk tropes. Since then all kinds of writers have freely and often gleefully crossed the boundaries between steampunk and cyberpunk.

And while steampunk's cultural breakthrough took longer than cyberpunk's, its time is most certainly now.

steam-powered links

Ask **Æther Emporium** <<http://etheremporium.pbworks.com/w/page/10454263/Wiki>>, the steampunk wiki, what steampunk is and you'll get eight different impassioned answers. Various writers suggest that it is a literary genre, an evolved fantasy, an aesthetic, a mythology, and a subculture. It is the "Personal Industrial Revolution," "a reaction to the utter soullessness and disposability of modern tech" and "over-sized rivets, aero

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shaped fins and elaborate exposed plumbing fixtures all covered with that 'comfortably worn' patina."

Clearly, deciding what steampunk is all about is not going to be easy! Part of the problem is that as more and more people are drawn to this subculture, they bring their own interests to it. Some are keen to dress up in corsets and riding boots, waistcoats and goggles, or uniforms of the armed forces of the imagination. Others want to make beautiful and idiosyncratic objects. Indeed, the **Maker Movement** <makezine.com> has come into its own at just the right time to help transform steampunk fancies into quirky reality. There is also self-proclaimed steampunk music, but no real agreement on what it ought to sound like.

But since we're readers here, let's concentrate on the literary branch. Aether Emporium polled members of the blog **Brass Goggles** <brassgoggles.co.uk/blog> for suggestions to stock the essential steampunk library <etheremporium.com>

pbworks.com/w/page/10454249/Steam-punk-Essentials>. The bloggers mentioned revered ancestors like **Jules Verne** <online-literature.com/verne>, **H.G. Wells** <online-literature.com/wellshg>, **Jack London** <london.sonoma.edu>, and **Arthur Conan Doyle** <online-literature.com/doyle>, men who wrote during steampunk prime time. Then there are precursors, some of whose work points toward the current iteration: **George MacDonald Fraser** <wjduquette.com/authors/gmfraser.html>, **Harry Harrison** <harryharrison.com>, **Michael Moorcock** <multiverse.org>, and **Talbot Mundy** <talbotmundy.com>. To their number, I might also add **Keith Laumer** <keithlaumer.com> for his Imperium series. I admit I was less impressed with their selections of contemporary steampunk. For that, let me commend a list compiled by the astute **John Klima** <libraryjournal.com/lj/reviewsgenrefiction/884588-280/steampunk_20_core_titles.html.csp> in *Library Journal*. In addi-

tion to Jeter, Blaylock, and Powers, Klima mentions Neal Barrett, Jr. <infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intnbjr.htm>, Gail Carriger <gailcarriger.com>, Cherie Priest <cheriepriest.com>, Gordon Dahlquist <bookreporter.com/authors/au-dahlquist-gordon.asp>, and Paul Di Filippo <pauldifilippo.com>, among others. Among those others he mentions are Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, who gave us the quintessential **The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen** <lg.wikia.com/wiki/League_of_Extraordinary_Gentlemen_Wiki>. Okay, so it's not a novel. It's a comic graphic novel. You got a problem with that?

Yet another writer Klima cites is China Miéville <chinamievill.net> for his novel *Perdido Street Station*. And here we begin to see a problem with steampunk's popularity. Don't get me wrong, *Perdido Street Station* is a wonderful book, but Miéville himself describes it as "basically a secondary world fantasy with Victorian era technology." Victorian era technology, but no Victoria. Or England. Or, indeed, any of our history. If one includes this book and others like it, as many do, it seems to me that the boundaries of this subgenre get harder to map. I don't want to play genre cop and Miéville probably doesn't care if his book is steampunk or not. But the more kinds of writing—or activities—that get called steampunk, the less meaning the word has.

Just saying.

debate

And the steampunk subculture recognizes this. Check out **The Great Steampunk Debate** <greatsteampunkdebate.com>, which is the archive of an online "discussion on ideology, beliefs, politics, ethics, and how all of these things intersect with steampunk." This exchange took place in May 2010. Among the subjects "debated" were the politics of steampunk, its relationship to the world of the nineteenth century that it mirrors, with emphasis on issues of gender, race, class, and industrialization, and the existence—or failure—of a center

that could hold its various subgroups together. Lest this sound like some academic colloquium, recall that that this took place on the internets, where the niceties of civilized discourse are rarely observed. Despite the fact that the noise to signal ration was definitely skewed toward clamor, it's worth skimming over the rants to find the quiet voices of reason. What I was able to glean from the debate was that different populations were attracted to the idea of steampunk for different reasons. Some were readers, some were media fans. Some were Makers, some were goths on the rebound. Some wanted just want to have fun, some want to change the world.

So what's wrong with that?

Nothing, of course. But to return to literary concerns, traditional SF writers have expressed misgivings about a subgenre that resolutely turns its back on our sometimes bewildering future to fixate on a period of history, which, while simpler, was filled with horrors that we are lucky to have escaped. Charles Stross made this case on his blog <antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2010/10/the-hard-edge-of-empire.html>:

If the past is another country, you really wouldn't want to emigrate there. Life was mostly unpleasant, brutish, and short; the legal status of women in the UK or US was lower than it is in Iran today: politics was by any modern standard horribly corrupt and dominated by authoritarian psychopaths and inbred hereditary aristocrats: it was a priest-ridden era that had barely climbed out of the age of witch-burning, and bigotry and discrimination were ever popular sports: for most of the population starvation was an ever-present threat.

At the end of his essay he asks, "what would a steampunk novel that took the taproot history of the period seriously look like?"

Scott Westerfeld gave a testy reply <scottwesterfeld.com/blog/2010/11/genre-cooties> in which he details a number of

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thoughtful essays by steampunk aficionados dealing with the very issues Stross raises. And as for the novel that takes an unflinching look at the Dickensian side of steampunk, he suggests Cherie Priest's popular **Boneshaker** <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boneshaker_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boneshaker_(novel))>. After pointing out that science fiction—specifically space opera—is not without the sin of under-examined assumptions, he strikes what might be considered a low blow at critics like Stross: “And yes, this is about YOU being OLD, steampunk-haters. (In spirit, not in years.)” *Ouch!*

Speaking of Cherie Priest, if you are looking for a passionate, intelligent, and knowledgeable explanation of what steampunk is all about, click over to her essay **Steampunk: What it is, why I came to like it, and why I think it'll stick around** <theclockworkcentury.com/?p=165>. She elaborates on two persuasive reasons: “(1). Steampunk comes from a philosophy of salvage and customization, and (2). Steampunk's inherent nature is participatory and inclusive, yet subversive.”

exit

If you are expecting some grand pronouncement on these matters, stop reading here. Like my friend and editor **Sheila Williams** <asimovs.com/2011_04-05/editorial.shtml>, I am of two minds on this subject. I definitely get uncomfortable when critics of steampunk go after it for being escapist—a calumny that has been used to marginalize SF since Gernsback's days. Clearly, in the hands of writers like Priest and Powers, steampunk deserves to be taken seriously. And even those aspects of steampunk that are more playful than thoughtful challenge consensus reality in ways that are good for us all. But not all steampunk worlds—or those of science fiction, for that matter—are as morally grounded as those of Powers and Priest. Critics have every right to insist that attention be paid when steampunk's delight in shiny surfaces glosses over human suffering.

Meanwhile, I still have an unanswered question. Mirrorshades and goggles—what's up with all the eyewear? ○

STEALTH

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Recently, Kristine Kathryn Rusch accomplished the remarkable feat of winning both the twenty-fifth annual *Asimov's Readers' Award* for best novella and *Analog's* AnLab award for best short story. She returns to our pages with another thrilling novella about the dangerous and destructive technology that was first encountered in "Diving Into the Wreck" (*Asimov's*, December 2005). The author's Diving series is having quite a year. Pyr published *City of Ruins* in May, and will publish the next book, *Boneyards*, in January. In other news, her next Retrieval Artist novel, now retitled *Anniversary Day*, will appear exclusively on *Audible.com* during the fall, and then be released in book format by WMG Publishing in December.

Now

Go, go, go, go!" Squishy waved her arms, shouting as she did.

She stood in the mouth of the corridor and watched as scientist after scientist fled the research station, running directly toward the ships.

The corridors were narrow, the lights on bright, the environmental system on full. It would have been cold in the corridors if it wasn't for the panicked bodies hurrying past her. The sharp tang of fear rose off them, and she heard more than one person grunt.

"Go, go, go!" She continued shouting and waving her arms, but she had to struggle to be heard over the emergency sirens.

An automated voice, androgynous and much too calm, repeated the same instructions every thirty seconds: *Emergency evacuation underway. Proceed to your designated evac area. If that evac area is sealed off, proceed to your secondary evac area. Do not finish your work. Do not bring your work. Once life tags move out of an area, that area will seal off. If sealed inside, no one will rescue you. Do not double back. Go directly to your designated evac area. The station will shut down entirely in . . . fifteen . . . minutes.*

Only the remaining time changed. Squishy's heart was pounding. Her palms were damp, and she kept running her fingers over them.

"Hurry!" she said, pushing one of the scientists forward, almost causing him to trip. "Get the hell out of here!"

Another ran by her, clutching a jar. She stopped him, took the jar, and set it down.

He reached for it. "My life's work—"

"Had better be backed up off site," she said, even though she knew it wasn't. The

off-site backups were the first thing destroyed, nearly three hours before. "Get out of here. *Now!*"

He gave the jar one last look, then scurried away. She glanced at the jar too, saw it pulsating, hating it, and wanting to kick it over. But she didn't.

She stood against the wall, moving the teams forward, getting them out. No one was going to die this day.

A woman clutched at her. "My family—"

"Will find you. They've been notified of the evac," Squishy said, even though she had no idea if that was true.

"Are they far enough away?" the woman asked, clutching at Squishy.

What made these people so damn clingy? She didn't remember scientists being clingy before.

"They are," Squishy said, "but you're not."

She pushed at the woman, and the woman stumbled, then started to run, letting her panic take over. They'd had drills here: Squishy made sure of that when she arrived, but apparently no one thought about what the drills actually implied.

And this was no drill.

Her ears ached from the sirens. Then the stupid automated voice started up again.

Emergency evacuation underway. Proceed to your designated evac area . . .

She tuned it out, counting the scientists as they passed. There was no way she could count a thousand people, not that all of them would run past her anyway. But she was keeping track. Numbers always helped her keep track.

Her heart raced, as if it was running along with everyone else.

Quint stumbled out of the side corridor, his face bloody, his shirt torn. He reached her and she flinched.

"We have to evacuate," he said, grabbing her.

"I'm going to go," she said. "I want to make sure everyone's out."

"They're out," he said. "Let's go."

She shook her head. "You go. I'll catch up."

"Rosealma, we're not doing this again," he said.

"Yes, we are," she said. "Get out *now*."

"I'm not leaving you," he said.

This was not the moment for him to develop balls. "Get out, Quint. I can take care of myself."

I always have, she thought, but bit back the words.

"Rosealma," he said. "I'm sorry—"

"Oh, for God's sake," she said. "Get *out*."

And she shoved him. He lost his balance, his feet hitting the jar. It skittered across the floor, and she looked at it, wondering what would happen if the damn thing shattered.

He saw her. "Do we need that?"

"Aren't you listening?" she said. "You're supposed to leave everything behind."

"You didn't make the rules," he snapped.

She pointed up, even though she wasn't sure if the automated voice came from "up" or if it came from some other direction. It did rather feel like the Voice of God.

"Those aren't my rules," she said. "They're the station's. Now hurry. I'll be right behind you."

"Promise me you won't do anything stupid, Rosealma," he said.

"When have I done anything stupid?" she asked, sounding calmer than she felt. Sometimes she thought that everything she had done was stupid. Hell, she knew that everything she had ever done was stupid. That was why she was here, to make up for the stupid, and it wasn't coming out so well.

"Rosealma—"

"Go," she said.

He gave her an odd look and then hurried, half-running, half-walking down the corridor. Twice he glanced over his shoulder, as if he expected her to follow.

She didn't.

The corridor was emptying out. No one had run past in at least a minute. The damn sirens sounded even louder in the emptiness.

Emergency evacuation underway. Proceed to your designated evac area . . .

"Shut up," she whispered, wishing she could shut the stupid voice down. But she didn't dare. She needed everyone off this station.

She needed everyone to live.

Nineteen Years Earlier

The mood on the skip was tense. The light was terrible. The tourist was lying next to the door, unconscious, blood covering his face. The three women running the dive stood near the control panel, looking down at him.

None of them wanted to help him. Rosealma knew that without consulting with the other two.

"He hasn't even gotten off the skip yet," Turtle said. She was thin and looked strange in her environmental suit. She hadn't put on the helmet, and without it, she really did look like a turtle.

She had gotten the nickname long before Rosealma met her, but Rosealma understood why the first time she'd seen Turtle in her environmental suit with her tiny head sticking out of it.

"Just because they have money doesn't mean they have brains," said the spacer-thin woman leading this little dive. She wouldn't tell anyone her name, insisting on being called Boss.

Rosealma didn't call anyone Boss, particularly a thirty-something woman whose only claim to the job title was the fact that she owned the skip that was taking them to the celebrated space wreck.

Still, this Boss promised good money for the practice dive, as she called it, and if the dive worked out, then both Turtle and Rosealma could join her team of divers. Boss wanted to take divers to real wrecks, unexplored wrecks, not the historic wrecks that tourists wanted to see. But she couldn't do that without government funding, and Boss never took money from the Enterran Empire—or so she said.

"Look," Rosealma said, squatting beside the stupid tourist. "I have some equipment. Let me see what I can do."

"We need to get him back." Boss ran a hand through her short cap of chestnut hair. "He needs a medic."

"I am a medic," Rosealma snapped.

Turtle looked at her in surprise. The two of them had been sleeping together for six months, and Rosealma hadn't told Turtle about her background. Or, rather, Rosealma hadn't told Turtle much about her background, including her medical training and her various scientific degrees.

"Then get to it," Boss said. "I don't think he'll appreciate getting an infection on top of losing the eye."

"He's not going to lose the eye." Rosealma grabbed the skip's medical kit from beside the control panel. Then she took her own tools from the bag she carried on every single trip.

"He's going to lose the eye," Boss said stubbornly, and she didn't sound sympathetic.

Rosealma wasn't sympathetic either. The guy really was an idiot. He had a tiny knife

and he had been gesturing with it, explaining to Boss how he would cut just a small bit of the historic wreck as a souvenir, and how it wouldn't hurt the wreck at all.

Boss had gotten angry and told him that if he was going to cut up the wreck, then she wouldn't take him to it. He had leaned toward her, shaking that little knife, blade up, and said, *I'm paying you, honey, to take me to that wreck, and if you don't put me on it, then I'm not paying for anything.*

You already paid a deposit, Boss had said.

I'll take it back.

Just try, she had said, and smiled.

He had leaned toward her, waving that blade, and the skip had lurched just enough so that he had lost his footing. He had let out a little squeak, and had fallen forward, the knife skittering out of his hand, leaving a tiny blood trail on the skip's floor.

Rosealma had glanced over her shoulder at the crucial moment. Turtle had been standing near the control panel, but she hadn't been touching it.

Or at least, she hadn't been touching it a second after the skip lurched. What she'd been doing a second or two before the lurch no one would ever know.

"The idiot sliced through his own eyeball," Boss said.

"I don't know why you let him come on board with a weapon," Turtle said.

"I didn't," Boss said. "The thing was small enough for him to conceal."

"Doesn't matter," Rosealma said. "If you move away, I can help him."

"I almost wish you wouldn't," Boss said.

"Then you'll get sued," Rosealma said, although she didn't know if that was true.

She crouched over the stupid tourist, tilted his head back, and cleaned the blood away from the eye. Then she used her handheld to magnify the eyeball.

Just like she thought. He had nicked it, making it bleed. Most of the blood came from the socket, not the eye itself.

She had an entire stash of lenses. Too many cases of laser blindness had made her cautious. The lenses would graft onto the eyeball, and serve as a protection until the victim could get to a real medical facility.

Boss was watching. Turtle leaned over.

"Squishy," Turtle said.

"What?" Rosealma asked.

"It looks squishy. Is it?"

Boss uttered a shaky laugh, and looked at Turtle. "For a minute, I thought you were calling her Squishy."

"Why not?" Rosealma muttered. "One name is the same as another."

She worked on the eye—and noted that it was a little squishy—but she didn't tell them that. Then she patched him up, but she didn't give him anything that would wake him. He needed to heal and they didn't need to listen to his bluster. He wasn't going to get to dive his precious little historic wreck, and Rosealma doubted he would get his deposit back, no matter how hard he protested.

Boss turned the skip around and headed back to her larger ship, *Nobody's Business*. For the rest of the trip, Turtle called Rosealma Squishy, and giggled.

The name stuck.

Now

The corridor was empty. The sirens continued to wail, and the androgynous voice repeatedly informed Squishy that she had only five minutes to evacuate.

She reached down and grabbed that jar. It was warm. She wondered what the hell it actually was. She knew what it wasn't. It wasn't a functioning *anacapa* drive.

But it might have been a malfunctioning version of it, missing the various pieces that actually made the *anacapa* function.

She carried the jar to one of the side rooms and set it inside.

Then she took one last look around. It hadn't been a bad research station. The station had been well designed and well equipped, although all of the state-of-the-art protections, all of the one-of-a-kind technology couldn't help it now.

She tapped into the control panel on the wall, looking for heat signatures and individual life tags. Everyone who was supposed to be here was tagged, and should show up on the panel. Everyone who wasn't supposed to be here should show up as a heat signature.

She was the only heat signature and had the only tag. In a place that normally housed a thousand scientists, she was the only one who remained.

She let out a small sigh of relief.

The sirens sounded even louder than they had before, probably because the station was empty. All of the spaceships had left as well, except for her designated evacuation vessel. She opened its systems, checked to make sure it was empty, then shut it down.

Finally, she punched in an access code, opening previously sealed corridors, then sprinted out the door.

The androgynous voice accompanied her.

Emergency evacuation underway. Proceed to your designated evac area . . .

She wanted to tell it to shut up, but of course it would shut up involuntarily, and not too long from now.

She ran as fast as she could down the escape route she had set up more than a month before. She wasn't in the best shape any longer, even though she had made certain to exercise every day. It didn't matter. She couldn't run as fast as she used to.

She wondered if that would make a difference. Maybe she should have gone to her designated evac area.

As if to mock her, the androgynous voice was telling her to get to that evac area.

Do not double back. Go directly to your designated evac area. The station will shut down entirely in . . . five . . . minutes.

"Shut up," she whispered, using precious breath. She was breathing harder than she expected.

She skidded around the last corner, putting out a hand to catch herself, then headed to the last remaining ship.

It wasn't quite a single ship and it wasn't quite a skip. It was a modified cruiser, one she had designed herself and parked on the station when she first arrived months ago.

She reached into her pocket, clicked the ship's remote, and ordered it to start, hoping the station's systems did not prevent the remote access. She had set them up so that they wouldn't, but everything changed in an emergency.

Do not finish your work. Do not bring your work. Once life tags move out of an area, that area will seal off. . . .

If she survived this, she would be hearing that stupid voice in her sleep. Small price, she supposed. Maybe she could try some lucid dreaming and shoot out the voice.

The doors were open to the docking area. The stupid voice was lying about everything being sealed off.

Well, not lying exactly. Unable to cope with directions Squishy had programmed long ago. She wanted *her* ship, not some designated evac vessel that she couldn't control. She hadn't even checked her dedicated evac vessel for supplies and provisions, although she made sure her cruiser was well stocked.

The station will shut down entirely in . . . three . . . minutes.

She ran up the ramp. The door to the ship, which she had rechristened *The Dane* in a fit of whimsy, stood open. She hurried inside, slammed the lock, shot through the airlock and into the ship itself.

Only two meters to the command chair, and she crossed those faster than she had run through the corridors. She slammed her open palm on the controls, recited the Old Earth Standard nonsense poem she had learned in the last year, and the controls came on.

Then she hit the preprogrammed escape plan and the ship roared into life. It rose and headed toward the docking doors faster than they were opening.

She cursed and hoped there was some kind of failsafe for those doors, because she didn't want to slow down and she didn't want to hit them and she certainly didn't want to be here with the station about to blow.

At the last second the doors seemed to slam open—shaking the wall as they hit, which had to sound like slamming, although she couldn't hear anything—and then she was free of the place.

The Dane zoomed away from the station as fast as the ship could safely go without hitting FTL. She turned the screens onto the station itself, imagined that snarky automated voice continuing its countdown to the now empty station:

The station will shut down entirely in . . . five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . .

She raised her head, expecting to see the station blow into a million pieces. Instead it remained intact and she wondered if she had gotten her count wrong. She hadn't really been paying attention to the clock. She'd been running, not counting minutes.

Her heart was pounding and she was breathing hard. Her palm had left a damp print on the controls.

She stared at the screens and wondered, for the very first time, if she had gotten it all wrong.

Nineteen Years Earlier

The woman sitting at the edge of the bar wasn't pretty. She was too thin, her head too small, her features not clearly defined. She wasn't even a woman—not quite, anyway. She was probably eighteen if she was a day, but she pretended to be older, and that had caught Rosealma's attention.

That, and the woman's cap of brownish-blond hair. The hair was choppy, clearly cut by the woman herself. Her long fingers were wrapped around a mug of some kind of ale, and she looked lonely.

Maybe it was the loneliness that caught Rosealma. Or maybe it was the woman's sideways glances. Rosealma tried not to watch her, but there was something, something interesting, the first interesting thing Rosealma had seen since she'd left Vallevu.

The bar was old and seedy, the space station not much better. Rosealma had used the last of her hazard pay to get here, and really didn't want to leave. She had placed six months' rent on a berth that wasn't much more than a bed, an entertainment wall, and an unlimited supply of reading material from the station's rather eclectic (and ancient) library.

At the moment, she was staying off the grid. Not because anyone was looking for her, but because she didn't want to be bothered. And so far no one had. One old spacer had told her she had the "look."

It's your eyes, he said, leaving off the endearment she had heard him use with other women on the station. *You got that long stare. You seen stuff, stuff I'm not sure I want to hear about.*

He was right: he didn't want to hear it. She didn't want to tell him. She didn't want to tell anyone. She didn't want to talk, not about her past. She wanted to pretend that her life had started here, on this stupid station, way out at the ass-end of nowhere.

The young woman glanced at her again, and Rosealma lifted her own mug of ale in a kind of toast. The woman smiled. She tilted her head sideways as she did so, as if she couldn't quite believe she had caught another person's attention. She might even have been blushing.

The bar owner, who was also the bartender, shouted at someone near the entrance, something about non-payment of a bill. Rosealma didn't listen. Out here, everyone was short of money, and everyone wanted something for nothing.

She found it was easier to remain quiet about everything, to be ignored rather than draw attention to herself. She had come as close to disappearing as a human being could without actually losing her identity and starting all over.

The woman at the end of the bar glanced at Rosealma again, then looked at the seat next to her.

Rosealma's breath caught. She wasn't sure if she should walk over. If she had a flirtation with the woman, then she would be noticed, and everything would change.

Still, she hadn't had a real conversation in six months, and surprisingly, she missed talking. Not about trivial things like the quality of the ale or the best place to eat for the fewest credits, but about ideas and politics and science and the things that people talked about when they were laughing and relaxing with each other.

She missed interaction, and she'd never thought she would.

She sighed, stood, and grabbed her mug of ale.

Then the lights flickered out, and her stomach floated. She recognized the moment as it happened: the gravity had changed. The lights came back on just as she floated upwards, her ale floating with her, the glass emptying and beads of liquid dotting everything around her.

No one screamed like they would have had this been planetside, although a few people cursed as their beverages took on a life of their own. The chairs and tables were bolted down, but the mugs weren't, and neither was the ice or the bar snacks or the lemons, olives, and cherries.

She and everyone else in the bar were in the middle of a choreographed mess, which would only get worse when the gravity returned to normal.

Behind her, the bar owner shouted, "You son of a bitch!" and that was when she realized that the gravity change wasn't some kind of malfunction; it had been planned, probably to get money out of the bar owner.

She glanced at the woman and was startled to see how lovely she looked, her cap of hair spiking upward, her long limbs gangly no longer. The woman looked at home in zero-g, as if floating was her preferred method of travel.

She used the tops of chairs to slowly propel herself toward Rosealma.

"It looks like there's trouble," the woman said, glancing toward the main entrance. The bar owner was shaking his fist, propelling himself backward as he did so, probably the only person in the entire bar who wasn't used to zero-g.

Rosealma couldn't tell which of the people floating around him had made him angry, and she really didn't want to find out. She smiled at the woman.

"I'm Rosealma."

The woman's eyebrows went up, giving her smile a wry cynicism. "Wow, that's a mouthful. You don't have a nickname?"

"Do I need one?" Rosealma asked.

"Everyone out here has a nickname. It's easier."

"Easier?"

"Yeah," the woman said. "That way we don't have to clarify which Rose or Alma

we're talking about. We don't need last names or even first names. We're just too damn lazy anyway."

And then she laughed. The laugh was raspy and deep, and Rosealma realized that the woman hadn't been eighteen for a long time. She was at least in her mid-twenties, maybe older, and she had seen as much or more as Rosealma had.

"What's your nickname?" Rosealma asked.

"Turtle," the woman said. "You know what a turtle is?"

"Some kind of Earth creature."

"Earth hell," Turtle said. "The little ones are all the way out here. Some ships have them as mascots."

"You're someone's mascot?"

Turtle grinned at her. "Naw. I look like a turtle."

"You don't," Rosealma said, although she wasn't exactly sure what a turtle looked like. "You're the prettiest thing in this bar."

Turtle smiled and tilted her head again. Her cheeks did turn red. "You be careful," she said, "or I'll start thinking you're flirting with me."

"Maybe I am flirting," Rosealma said, startled at her own boldness.

Turtle's smile grew. "Then we should get out of this bar before the gravity changes. It's going to be a mess and I'll feel obligated to clean it up."

"I don't feel obligated to anything," Rosealma said. Which wasn't true, of course. She felt obligated for everything, and sorry for even more, and the weight of everything, from the regrets to the losses to the destruction of all of her dreams, threatened to crash her to the floor quicker than a gravity change.

"So you're running away," Turtle said. Her tone was businesslike, not curious. She wasn't asking a question, just stating a fact.

"No," Rosealma said. "You have to care to run away."

Turtle studied her for a moment, the smile gone. Then she nodded once. "Well, then, I need to run away from this bar." She extended her hand. "You want to come along?"

Rosealma looked at Turtle's hand, with its long fingers and visibly chewed cuticles. Rosealma took it almost before she realized she had made a decision.

"Let's go," she said, "and never look back."

Turtle raised their joined hands. "Deal," she said.

Now

The station blew.

It started in the middle. A glow built, then expanded. The center disappeared in the light, and that's when Squishy realized it was imploding.

She slammed her palm on the control panel, her fingers grasping for the FTL command. It took four movements to launch FTL, and her shaking hand made all four hard. It felt like the movements took forever, even though it probably only took a few seconds. Still, she had to get out of here.

Silently she cursed herself for wanting to see it go.

The Dane winked out, the images vanishing from the screen, and as they did, she collapsed in the command chair, hands to her face. Her heart was pounding and she was feeling just a little queasy.

She had pulled it off, and no one died.

"You want to explain to me what the fuck just happened?"

The male voice made her jump. She had thought she was alone. She had *assumed* she was alone. She hadn't even checked to see if anyone had gotten into *The Dane*. *The Dane* would have masked a heat signature from the station's control board. She

would have had to ask *The Dane* as she got into the airlock, and she had been in such a hurry, she hadn't thought of it.

She was such an idiot.

She dropped her hands slowly, making herself breathe as she did so. She wanted to seem calmer than she was, even though he had seen her jump.

She recognized the voice—how could she not? She had lived with it for years, and when she heard it again, even after the loss of decades, it was as if she had never been away from him.

Quint.

She turned her chair toward him.

He leaned against the entrance, arms crossed. There was only one other room in this cruiser, and he had probably been waiting in it. She hadn't bothered to check. Her mistake.

The blood had dried on his face, black and crusty, outlining the wrinkles he had allowed to appear on his skin over the decades. The ripped shirt was gone, though, replaced by his uniform's brown jacket. He probably hadn't looked at his reflection. He probably didn't realize the blood was still on his face, if he had even known it was there in the first place.

The fact that he was on her ship surprised her. Not because he figured out it was hers, but because it took some stones to avoid the evac ships and wait for her, stones she hadn't realized he had.

She hadn't answered his question. He raised his eyebrows, silently asking it again.

"The station blew up," she said. "Or it was blowing up, just like we knew it would. I just hit the FTL. The last thing we want is to be near that part of space. There's a good chance that explosion could open an interdimensional rift."

He frowned. "A what?"

She almost smiled, but she didn't. She had distracted him. He hadn't really been asking about the station before.

"An interdimensional rift." She swallowed. "The stealth tech was unstable."

"It's always been unstable," he snapped. "You know that better than most."

She nodded. She did know it better than most. That was why she was here. But she wasn't going to tell him that. At least, not yet.

"Yes," she said. "But this time, the entire research station paid the price instead of a few volunteers."

"A few . . ." He shook his head. She could almost read his mind. They both knew that it wasn't a few volunteers who had paid the price over the years. It had been hundreds of people, most of whom hadn't volunteered at all, unless their induction into the Enterran military counted as volunteering.

"Only this time," she said, "no one died."

"That you know of," he said.

"I do know," she said. "In fact, I'm certain. That's why I left last. I made the computer system check for anyone else."

"And if someone else was on that station, what would you have done?" he asked. "With five minutes left, what would you have done?"

"Something," she said, knowing her answer was inadequate, knowing that it was probably wrong. What would she have done? What could she have done?

At that point, nothing. Maybe opened a few corridors, prayed that whoever was trapped would get out on their own. Could get out on their own.

"Something." He snorted. "Don't lie to me, Rosealma."

Amazing how all of the old patterns came back as if time hadn't passed at all. Time was such a strange thing—fluid and rigid all at once, existing in different dimen-

sions at different speeds, and yet happening right now, this instant, moving forward, never backward.

Or at least, not backward yet.

"How come you didn't go to your evac ship?" she asked, then felt a moment of panic. They hadn't waited for him. Had they?

She made herself take a deep breath. They hadn't. She had checked, made certain that all of the evac ships had left before she had.

She wondered if he saw the thought flick across her face. It had been decades, but he still knew her too. And it was taking him a long time to respond to her question.

"I wanted to make sure you got out," he said, and she felt a surge of anger. Even the anger didn't dissipate over time. It was like being an alcoholic—one drink, one surge of anger—and everything came back as if it had never disappeared.

"Don't lie to me, Quint," she said in the exact same tone he had used.

He tilted his head. The expression used to be attractive on his unlined, youthful face. On his older blood-covered face, it was a bit ghoulish.

"I'm not lying to you, Rose. If you'll remember, I tried to get you out earlier."

"I do remember," she snapped, "and I told you to leave. You did. But you didn't go to your evac ship, and now I want to know why."

He stared at her.

"What if I hadn't come here?" she asked. "You would have died. This ship is tied to me. You couldn't have gotten it out of the station."

"But you did come," he said softly.

And he had known she would. She had asked the wrong question. The answer to her initial question was simple: he had come here because of her. What she should have asked was this: how did he know she would be here?

She stared at him, feeling a tug. She wanted to continue the fight—it was familiar, it was comfortable, it was how they related—but she also wanted to get him the hell off of this ship. She had no idea who he really was now. She had changed a lot in two-plus decades. He probably had, too.

"The ship is registered to you, Rose," he said after a moment.

She felt her breath catch. She hadn't expected him to answer her.

"You still use my name," he said.

She shrugged a single shoulder. She used his last name because it was her last name, at least in the Empire. Quintana. Young and naïve and supposedly in love, she had taken his name and had become the wife of Edward Quintana, better known as Quint. He had had a nickname then. She hadn't.

"I saw no reason to change it," she said.

"Never remarried?" He didn't ask if she had ever fallen in love, ever had another relationship. Quint was about the legalities. He had always been about the legalities.

"No," she said.

He remained silent so that she could ask *What about you?*, but she didn't.

"Me, either," he said after a moment.

She nodded once, then swiveled her chair away from him, and looked at the control panel. She tapped the coordinates, altering them. She couldn't go to the rendezvous point nor could she go back to the Nine Planets Alliance, not with him on board.

She wasn't quite sure where to go, so she programmed in a station at the edge of Enterran space.

"You changing our course, Rose?"

"Just making sure it's correct," she said, feeling a bit breathless. It was hard to lie to him, just like it had always been. Her cheeks warmed. Somewhere inside her was that young girl who thought she had fallen in love.

"Tell me what really happened on the research station," he said.

"I don't know," she said, not facing him. "Some kind of chain reaction is my guess. There should have been better protections for working with stealth tech."

"Scientists have worked on stealth tech for years," he said. "No research station has ever blown up."

"Scientists had never had a dedicated site to work on stealth tech before," she said.

"I suspect that was the mistake."

"Why?" There was something in his voice, something new. He didn't trust her.

Of course he didn't trust her. She had left him, then divorced him. She had never given him the courtesy of an explanation. She always figured he knew.

Only when she got older, and her relationship with Turtle decayed, did she realize that each person experienced the relationship differently. He probably hadn't understood what happened, any more than Squishy could explain why her relationship with Turtle died on a disastrous dive with Boss ten years ago.

"Why would that be a mistake, Rosealma?" His voice sounded strangled as if he was trying to pull the emotion from it.

"I believe stealth tech builds on itself." Or at least, the kind of stealth tech the Empire was developing. They were only working on one small part of what turned out to be a powerful drive used by the Dignity Vessels. The *anacapa* drive was dangerous in experienced hands. In inexperienced hands, it was deadly.

As she had learned repeatedly over the years.

"And your belief is based on what, exactly?" Quint asked.

She swallowed hard. She didn't want to answer that honestly.

"I came back to stealth tech research a few years ago," she said.

"When you left Vallevu?" he asked.

She turned, surprised. He hadn't moved, arms still crossed, head still slightly tilted.

"I still have friends there too, you know," he said.

She hadn't even thought of that. She could have checked up on him in the two years she lived there without him, but she hadn't even tried. He wasn't someone she thought about.

She didn't want to think about him, even with him standing right there.

"Yes," she said tightly. "After I left Vallevu."

"I couldn't find you anywhere after that," he said.

"I didn't realize you were looking," she said, refusing to be relieved. She didn't want him to know she had gone to the Nine Planets Alliance. She didn't want to tell him anything.

He shrugged. "The Empire had no record of your work after you got discharged."

"You checked," she said, feeling cold.

"When you got here," he said, "you better believe I checked. You'd taken up a medical practice on Vallevu. I had no idea why you were back in stealth tech. I'm still not sure I believe it, not after so long an absence."

"Sometimes the Empire doesn't keep records about its researchers," she said.

"I can access most records," he said. "Even the ones they don't keep."

She felt cold. "You can't follow everything."

"I can try," he said.

Her heart was racing. He wasn't threatening her, was he? Was he here because he knew what she'd been doing, because he understood that her purpose on the station hadn't been benign?

For the first time, she wasn't exactly sure how to handle him.

She had to give him something. She wasn't sure why; she just knew that she did.

"I worked salvage for a while. I gave the Empire a mostly intact Dignity Vessel back then. If you check the payouts, you'll see one to me."

He continued to watch her, as if he didn't entirely believe her. If he mentioned that

the same Dignity Vessel had exploded about two years later, then she would know she was in real trouble.

Instead, he sighed and let his arms fall to his sides. "Salvage, Rose?"

It was her turn to shrug. "Once a cargo monkey, always a cargo monkey," she said with less levity than she had planned.

"Still," he said, "someone as brilliant as you shouldn't work salvage."

"I needed time off from being brilliant," she said. "Being brilliant kills people."

"And working salvage doesn't?"

She thought back to the dive that had caused her to break up with Turtle, the dive that had cost the lives of two other divers because Boss hadn't believed that Squishy had known what she was talking about. Squishy had known that the Dignity Vessel they had found was dangerous, and Boss wouldn't listen. The deaths weren't the worst of it. The deaths had simply been a symptom of the way that stealth tech—imperial stealth tech—seemed to drive everyone insane.

"Do you ever hate your life, Quint?" Squishy asked.

He studied her for a few minutes. She could see him trying out and discarding several answers, including the first one—the truthful one, whatever that may have been.

"No, I don't hate my life," he said. "Why?"

Because, maybe if he did, they could talk. Maybe if he regretted all he had done, they could talk.

But he didn't, and she knew that meant trouble.

Six Months Earlier

The research station was a marvel. She hadn't seen anything that big or that well constructed before. At first, it intimidated her, and then she realized that even the largest, most well-built thing could be brought down, usually by its own flaws.

The first flaw? The Empire's belief in credentials. Hers were still valid, still respected, despite the twenty years since her discharge from the military. She was considered one of the pioneers of stealth tech and as such, the researchers were happy to have her back in the fold. They were pleased that she had returned, and saw it as a happy accident, one that would enable them to make the breakthrough they had always strived for.

Her time in Vallevu had served her well. After she had left Boss's team the first time, she had come home—or what she thought of as home—to the former military base where she had first been stationed. When she had initially been stationed at Vallevu, she hadn't lived planetside. She had lived in the science station, in orbit. The families lived on the planet below for safety's sake, and that part had worked.

No one in the families had died there. But they all got scarred so badly that the Empire actually took pity on them, decommissioned the base, sold them the land, and gave them enough money to fund the community, so long as they never talked to anyone about what happened.

It made the small community of Vallevu wary of outsiders, but Squishy hadn't been an outsider. Not when she limped home, defeated and ruined, her second attempt at a career ending in death just like the first.

Well, not quite like the first. Because her diving career had ended with two deaths she'd tried to prevent instead of hundreds of deaths she had caused.

She used to shut down when she thought of those deaths, but no longer. Now they made her angry.

And anger was why she had come to this research station. Anger, and the taste she had recently acquired for revenge.

But she hadn't expected to find Quint here. On her second day as a fulltime em-

ployee of the research station, she had been sitting in the spectacular office they had given her when he ducked his head inside and said, "Bet you never expected to see me again."

Her breath caught and it took her a moment to compose herself. She didn't smile. Quint didn't deserve her smile.

"I certainly didn't expect to see you here," she said, and that was true.

"I hadn't expected to see you here either," he said, then stepped farther into the room.

She struggled to remain steady. She didn't want to be near him.

"So," he said, "how do we play this? As the friendly exes who occasionally share a beer or as the exes who can't stand the sight of each other and avoid each other at all costs?"

She swallowed, feeling off balance for the first time since she had arrived. She didn't want to "play" this at all. She wanted to pretend it had never happened, but it had, and now she had to deal with her ex-husband, who both knew her better than anyone ever had and who didn't know her at all.

"Is there something in between?" she asked.

His smile faded a little. "How about I come back after we've had some time to think about it?"

She nodded.

"Thanks," she said and returned to her desk, continuing to unpack. After a moment, she realized he was still there. Apparently, she wasn't going to get rid of him as easily as she wanted to.

"What are you doing here, really?" she asked.

"I always check in the new arrivals," he said. "I was surprised to see your name."

"I'll bet," she said. She hadn't looked for his. She had looked for one other name, the former head of the stealth tech project, Boss's father. But she hadn't seen his name. Boss believed him dead, and Squishy thought the same thing. But sometimes, it paid to be cautious.

Although she hadn't been cautious enough with the names from her own past.

Then she realized exactly what Quint had said. "You didn't check me in."

"That's what I'm doing now," he said. "You need a tour of the facility? An introduction to the other staff?"

"That was already taken care of," she said.

"Because you're a VIP," he said, and she couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

"They seem to think I'm the godmother of stealth tech," she said, trying to make a joke. Instead her eyes filled with tears. She didn't want him to see that, so she turned away.

"Yeah," he said, "we never really know who we're going to become, do we?"

"Or who others think we should be," she said. "Whether we want to be that person or not."

Now

She couldn't go to the rendezvous point. Not even if she somehow dropped Quint off along the way. He was watching her, in ways she hadn't expected.

Fortunately, she hadn't been in touch with any of the others since she'd started her work at the research station.

She hoped they had gotten their jobs done. Some of it she knew they had completed—the off-site backup site had gone down on time—and some of it she wouldn't know if anything changed, not if she didn't get in touch with them.

It was hard to destroy all of the modern research on stealth tech. She knew she would miss a lot of it. But that was why she had decided to blow the facility, why she'd figured it had to be destroyed from the inside out.

Before she had planted the explosives, she had planted information that showed how flawed stealth tech was, and would lead anyone who investigated to believe that the tech itself caused the explosions.

Which, technically, it had.

"How come you didn't evacuate with everyone else, Rosealma?" Quint asked.

"I did evacuate," she said. "I'm alive, just like you are."

He shook his head. "You had an escape route planned. You came to this ship, not to your evac ship."

"So did you," she said.

"You know what I mean," he said.

She ran her hand along the edge of the control panel. This cruiser felt small with two people in it. She really wanted to get rid of him, but she didn't know how. Drop him off somewhere? Dump him into an escape pod? Ask him politely to leave?

"What are you implying?" she asked, tired of the dance. "Are you implying that I was behind what happened?"

"Were you?" he asked.

The question hurt, even though it was logical. Even though she had been behind it.

"How dare you ask me that?" she said softly. "How dare you? After all we've been through, why wouldn't I have my own escape planned? Why wouldn't I plan for disaster? I figured I'd be running out of that facility at top speed at one point or another, and in no way was I going to trust a ship attached to the research station, under computer control of that station. I figured I'd only get one chance to save myself, and I was going to do it my way."

Quint stopped leaning on the doorway. He ran a hand over his face, his fingers stopping as they hit the dried blood. He seemed startled by it, then took a shaky breath.

"If that's how you felt, why did you come back?" he asked.

"Because I couldn't stay away," she said. "I know more than most people. And I couldn't let other scientists stumble around in the dark."

"Yet the results were worse than before," he said.

She shook her head. "No one died this time."

"You could argue that no one died before," he said.

"You could argue it," she said. "But you would be wrong."

Twenty-one Years Earlier

"**Y**ou did *what*?" Rosealma asked, standing behind the clear double panes. She was queasy, hands on the control panel, feeling like she was going to be sick.

Not again, she thought. Not again.

She had helped design this military base. She was the one who suggested putting it in orbit above a sparsely populated planet. She was the one who suggested that the families live in Vallevu, a very pretty city on the ground below, so that they were nowhere near the experiments.

She had set up the sections of the base, keeping various experiments away from other experiments. The dangerous stuff was so far away from the operational and housing parts of the base that people joked about it, saying they needed a shuttle just to get to work in the morning.

She wanted it that way. She had even worked on the committees that set up the

procedures and regulations—no one worked alone, no one worked on stealth tech in isolation, no one experimented on human subjects without a mountain of approval, no one made decisions without some kind of failsafe.

And now she stood in the deepest, darkest, most distant stealth tech lab, and saw—nothing. No lab techs, no furniture, no walls. Even part of the interior of the damn base was missing.

Her stomach hurt and her hands trembled. The scientist beside her was just a baby, round-faced, wide-eyed, barely old enough to have a graduate degree, let alone the kind of credentials that allowed him to work in her lab.

Not that she was much older, in years anyway. But in life—she had aged fifty years in the past five.

“What did you do?” she asked again.

She knew it was him because he was the only one in the staging area, and he was the one who called her, which pissed her off, because he should have contacted an entire team when something went wrong.

“I—” His voice broke, and she wasn’t sure he would be able to get the words out. She needed him to get the words out because if he didn’t, she would have to review the logs, and that would take time, time she suspected they didn’t have.

“I can’t fix this unless you tell me what you did,” she snapped.

He opened his mouth, then closed it. She cursed, and turned to the control panel. She’d even had a control panel installed in each of the labs as if they were separate laboratory ships operating in deep space. If anything went wrong, the labs should have isolated themselves even further, but this one hadn’t. She had no idea how many people had been working in the next lab over, the lab that was no longer there, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. But she was going to have to find out.

“You said we actually got the cloak to work,” he said.

She whirled on him. What was his name? Robbie, Reggie, Ralphie? She glanced at the name badge along the front of his uniform jacket. Hansen. Radley Hansen.

“We got the cloak to work in a limited fashion,” she said. “Meaning it masked a single item, very small. A coin. That was it. Nothing more elaborate than that.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know, ma’am, I’m sorry, ma’am.”

She went cold. “You came in here, by yourself, and ran the experiment again, didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, truly, I was just thinking—”

“Of yourself, of promotion, of the fact that if you succeeded, you would own stealth tech, you would be the one who everyone came to because you knew how it worked, isn’t that right?”

“Sort of, ma’am. I thought I saw an anomaly in the data from the first experiment, and I came in to double-check it—”

“Alone,” she said. “You came in alone.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Against direct orders. No one was to work alone.”

His face was red. “Everyone does it, ma’am.”

Anger surged through her. She wanted to hit something—hell, she wanted to hit him. Everyone did it? And she wasn’t aware of it? If this were a minor infraction, she would check right now. But it wasn’t minor, it was major, and she needed to deal with the crisis first, not with the group of idiots who broke the rules and might just have cost dozens of lives.

“So you ran the experiment again,” she said.

“First I read the data, and really, ma’am, there was something wrong. When you shut down the cloak, the coin reappeared, but it wasn’t the same coin.”

"Of course it was the same coin." She had checked it herself.

He shook his head. "It was an older coin. I can show you the scans—"

"I don't want to see the damn scans," she said. "I want to know what you did."

He closed his eyes, knowing he was admitting to something that might be the death of his career at best, might get him court-martialed at worst.

"I brought in one of my own coins," he said, his entire face trembling. His eyes popped open. They were red and round and filled with fear. "I knew every marking, I recorded everything I knew about that coin, I even wrapped it in a strand of my hair, so that I would know it was mine."

She stayed very still because if she didn't stay still she would lay this asshole flat, and then pummel him, maybe to death.

"I put it in there," he said, his voice breaking again, "and I set it in the same position as the other coin had been in during the first experiment, and I came out, and I ran the experiment again, only this time, the cloak didn't work, it sent out this pulse of energy and it was big and it demolished the back half of the room, and I tried to shut it down, and it won't shut down, it's still growing I think and I tried to reverse it, and when that didn't work, I called you."

"So you fucking tampered with the tech before contacting me?"

"I was trying to fix it," he said.

"You are eighteen different kinds of idiot," she said. "You need to call in the rest of the team, right now."

"But ma'am, I think the field is growing and if it pulses again, we'd lose anyone who showed up here."

She whirled on him. "So you figured *I* was the expendable one?"

"No, ma'am, no. I figured we had to solve this with the fewest people and you were the only chance of doing that. You're the one who knows this stuff backward and forward—"

"And I'm the one who put in the safeguards that you didn't follow to prevent precisely this kind of thing from happening," she said, turning back to the controls, shaking now because she was only just beginning to understand how catastrophic this all was, all because some kid wanted to further his career and figured he'd be forgiven when he discovered the secret to everything.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't intend it, ma'am."

"You didn't intend it," she repeated with deep sarcasm. "Of course you didn't intend it, you idiot. You intended to be complimented and told how damn brilliant you are. Well, that'll never happen now. It just depends on how many people have died as to what kind of stupid they'll consider you."

He took a step backward, as if her words had the force of blows.

"Have you contacted anyone else like I just asked?" she said, knowing he hadn't.

"Have you?"

"N-n-no, ma'am."

"Then get on it." She was shaking with fury, and the anger wouldn't do her any good. But dammit, she had done everything she could to prevent something like this, and it had happened anyway, and if what she saw was any indication, it was worse, it was worse than the first time.

The first time. She shook her head, struggling not to let the force of memory land on top of everything else. The first time, she had been a graduate student at the most prestigious school in the sector, Mehkeydo Academy, and it had been her favorite professor who'd vanished.

Well, he hadn't vanished, he actually had gone into a malfunctioning stealth tech field to save a post-doctoral student, and he had never come out. Neither of them had. Only that accident had been confined to the room where the experiments were

being conducted, and the two of them—professor and student—hadn't instantly vanished. They had shuddered, or their image had, as if it had been on some kind of readout and the readout had skipped. That had gone on for a good ten minutes, and then they had disappeared, and nothing the team had ever done had brought them back.

Modern stealth tech studies had been in their infancy then. Mehkeydo Academy had led the research, thinking it a harmless investigation into ancient technologies. Although the Enterran Empire's military had been around even then, blocking the building, taking over the experiments when it became clear that something had gone wrong.

Rosealma had ignored them, concentrating instead on figuring out what had happened, figuring out whether or not she could at least recover the bodies of Professor Holmes and the post-doc.

She never did, and she had theories as to why, but they got subsumed in the quest for safety measures while studying a viable and possibly life-saving technology.

She had believed in this stuff once, and it had brought her here. To a room with no back where an entire wing of the science lab had just vanished. Or maybe (best case) maybe it had simply been cloaked.

But she doubted it, and she knew she didn't have the ability to figure all of this out on her own.

Hansen did have a point: the more people who came here now, the more people were at risk. But she needed help—they needed help.

She hit the command button that she had insisted be installed in every lab. Her staff joked about it, saying Rosealma wanted instant access to the head of the facility because she didn't feel important enough.

She did want instant access because she needed it in moments like this. Nonessential personnel had to leave the base, and she couldn't make that call. She needed permission to have some staff help her with the crisis. And she needed everything done Right Now.

Now

“Where are we going, Rosealma?” Quint asked. He rubbed his face, trying to remove the caked blood.

She sighed, stood up, and got out her medical kit. Time to see how injured he really was.

“I don't know where we're going,” she said as she tugged the small kit out of the storage area near the door. She set the kit on her chair.

“You changed course a while ago,” he said.

She opened the kit, slipped on some gloves, and removed some cleansing strips. “Yeah, I did.”

The less she lied to him, the better.

“From where to where?” he asked.

She cupped the cleansing strips in her right hand and walked over to him. “I have no fucking idea. Now hold still.”

“What about the rendezvous point?” he asked as she grabbed his chin with her left hand, and it took all of her control not to start in surprise.

“The station's?” she asked.

He nodded and she tightened her hold on his chin. Her fingers were probably causing bruises, and she didn't care. She wrapped the cleansing strip around her index and middle finger and began to wipe off the blood. Scrape it off was a better way to put it.

"I'm not going back," she said. "I was stupid to go back in the first place. It's as if every time someone messes with stealth tech the accidents get worse. I can't keep involving myself in that."

"Yet you can't stay away, can you?" he asked, the words somewhat mangled from the force of her fingers on his cheeks.

She didn't answer him. As the blood came off, she found a series of small cuts, some of which still had debris embedded in them.

"What happened?" she asked him. "I thought there weren't any explosions on the station until that big one."

"Cloris Kashion saw something embedded in one of the stealth tech tubes," he said. "She decided to remove it."

Squishy's heart started to pound. She wondered if he could feel it through her fingertips. She forced herself to concentrate on cleaning the wounds.

The stealth tech tubes weren't really tubes at all. They were jars filled with just enough material to start a stealth tech reaction. Only it didn't have the right composition. So much was missing, so many details she had only just started to learn when she began working with a real, active Dignity Vessel's *anacapa* drive. The pieces that the Empire had of what it called stealth tech were so dangerous that they could make entire regions of space impossible to pass through.

She had attached the explosive devices to the various tubes. It had taken her two days. The devices were tiny and almost impossible to see. They slipped into the tube, and once turned on, interacted with the tech, destroying it.

She had initially developed the weapon years ago, but she had since modified it with the help of the Dignity Vessel's engineers, so that it wouldn't open the interdimensional rift she had mentioned to Quint.

"There was just a flash of something as her hand went around the tube," he said. "I can't tell you what it was, only that I had seen it before somewhere, and I knew—"

He shook his head, or tried to. Her fingers were still clutching his chin. His gaze met hers, and so far as she could tell, she was seeing deep inside him. He was vulnerable and at this moment—or maybe at the moment he remembered—he was scared.

"I just shoved everyone out and tried to grab her, but she had pulled on that thing, and the tube exploded, sending me backward through the door. We got it closed, but just barely. That was when I came looking for you."

"And you got her out, right?" Squishy asked.

His look changed. Subtly. It went from open to closed, from frightened to shut off, in the space of a second.

"You could argue that no one died," he said.

She closed her eyes. "And you would be wrong."

Twenty-one Years Earlier

Sixteen of them, sixteen scientists—the best in the Empire—working their asses off. Rosealma coordinated all of them, dividing her own mind into a thousand pieces so that she could think of the implications of stealth tech science and manage her team all at the same time.

They were working fast, because they were all afraid that whatever Hansen had unleashed would grow and grow and eventually envelop the station. There was an energy signature that Rosealma didn't recognize buried in the middle of the reaction, something she knew her people hadn't created, and she was afraid that the experiment had morphed into something she didn't recognize.

Sixteen scientists, struggling to contain the reaction. Once they contained it, they

would shut it down. But it kept growing, and she was afraid it was going to pulse again.

She had looked at the records. Hansen's description was spot-on. The experiment had pulsed.

But she suspected he was wrong about the reason. He said he had tried the experiment again—and he had. But it looked like her successful cloak, the one she had celebrated the night before he contacted her, had never really ceased. She thought she had shut down the experiment, thought that was confirmed by the reappearance of that coin. Hansen was right: the coin *was* different. But he was also wrong: the coin *was* the same. It was older, and it shouldn't have been. If she had to guess—and hell, that was all she was doing these days, she was *guessing*—then she would guess that the coin hadn't been cloaked at all, but it had moved forward then backward in time. When she had shut down the experiment, or moved to shut down the experiment, or initiated the shutdown that she thought would turn off the damn cloak, she had brought the coin back to its starting point.

The coin had experienced time differently than she had, and that alarmed her.

It also gave her hope. Because if she could move a coin forward then backward in time, maybe she could move people forward then backward in time. She might be able to recover the folks who had gotten lost.

"Might" being the operative word.

And she tried not to think about all the pitfalls, including the most important one: coins were immobile by nature; people were not. So if all of those people got moved to a different time period or they experienced time differently (more rapidly?) then they had probably moved away from the experiment area. They wouldn't all be in that area when the experiment got shut down.

She proposed that solution to her team and no one argued with her. The key was to shut down the experiment—all the way down—because her fear (their fear) was that it would grow and create some kind of rift or keep growing, even after it had consumed the station itself.

Somewhere in the middle of all this chaos, while she was thinking of a thousand different things, and trying to concentrate on each one of them, Quint came into the lab and scared her to death.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asked, blocking him with her body.

He lifted bags that he had been holding in both hands. The bags smelled of garlic and fresh bread. "Bringing food."

"Get out," she said. "You can't stay."

"I can do whatever I want, Rosealma," he said gently. "I outrank you."

"It's dangerous here," she said. "I want you gone."

He gave her a small smile, then set the bags on a chair. He knew better than to set them on any tabletop, near any experiment at all. The scents grew stronger, mixing with the smell of cooked beef and thyme. Rosealma's stomach growled and she realized she was lightheaded.

"How long has it been?" she asked him softly.

"Twenty hours," he said, and pulled her toward him. He held her tightly, and she tried not to squirm away.

He had always worried about her, always told her not to let the dangers of her job ruin their lives. He meant let the dangers of her job ruin his life—he was afraid she would be the one who died, just like her professor had. Quint had probably come in here just to make sure she wasn't taking unnecessary risks.

"I'm supposed to tell you," he said so quietly she could barely hear him, "that you have another twenty hours. At that point, you and your team will have to leave."

"We're not leaving until we solve this," she said.

He shook his head. "It's not your decision."

"We can't just leave this," she said. "It's dangerous. We think it's expanding."

She wasn't supposed to tell him any of this, but she figured it didn't matter. Clearance was a minor issue. Besides, he was probably reporting to the head of the station. And maybe even to the military's science commander himself.

"I know," Quint said, his voice still low. "That's what some of the others are saying."

"Then you understand why we can't leave it," she said.

"It might expand you out of existence," he said.

She nodded. "Or expand this part of space out of existence, or maybe even part of the planet. We don't know, Quint."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "They're removing you all in twenty hours, whether you've solved this or not."

"And they're going to let the expansion happen?" she asked. "They're going to leave this disaster untouched?"

"They're going to blow it up," he said.

She pulled away from him. "They can't do that. It might make the situation worse. It might make this thing grow faster. We just don't know. You have to tell them to leave me alone."

"I'll do my best, Rose," he said, "but I'm not in charge any more than you are."

"But it's stupid—"

"I know," he said, then kissed her. The kiss felt good. It brought her to herself momentarily, like the smell of food had. She had almost forgotten how to be alive, because she had been so busy thinking.

He clung to her for a moment, then eased back just enough so that he could see her face. "Promise me you'll leave when the time comes," he said.

"I can't promise that," she said.

"You'll die otherwise."

"We'll stay until we finish this," she said. "You tell them that."

"I already have," he said, his voice wobbling just a bit. "And they said that doesn't matter. They're destroying the base in a little over twenty hours. With you on it or not."

She looked at him. "You'd let them do that?"

"I don't have a choice," he said. "They didn't want me to come in now. They didn't want me to warn you. I got permission for that. I might not get permission to pull you out. I'll try, Rose, but I can't guarantee anything."

"Neither can I," she said, and turned her back on him.

Now

He actually needed minor surgery on some of the cuts. They were deep and too wide, and filled with all kinds of debris. She convinced him to lie down on the only bed—a foldout that recessed into a wall.

While she worked on his cuts, she couldn't stop thinking about what he had said.

She hadn't compared the number of people who escaped to the number of people who had been in the station that day. And if he was right, then a few people—not just Cloris—could have died, and it wouldn't have shown up on Squishy's scans. At least, it wouldn't have shown up with the scans she had done.

Maybe if she had done some others . . .

She forced herself to concentrate on the microsurgery she was doing. She had to clean out those wounds carefully. She couldn't leave even the smallest bit of debris in them. She had no idea what was in that particular stealth tech experiment that Cloris had destroyed or if whatever had embedded itself in Quint's skin had been

from that experiment. It might have been from her bomb, or it might have been from the room itself. Or something from a rift—she had no idea.

But Cloris had vanished. Quint told Squishy that much by repeating her own words to her. Cloris had vanished in that bright light, and because the Enterran military's science branch had yet to rule on what that meant in connection to stealth tech, Cloris was still technically alive.

Squishy had run into that at Vallevu, the way that all of the survivors left behind on the planet couldn't get death benefits—and some survivors didn't want death benefits, because they didn't want to believe their loved ones had died, even though years had gone by.

Still not focusing, not entirely. The news of Cloris's death had shaken Squishy more than she wanted to admit. She had planned to pull off this particular job without killing anyone.

She had failed.

But she couldn't fail at this. Microsurgery had become a specialty of hers. General practice medicine had become a specialty—a way of making up for all the people her other specialties had killed.

Each cut in Quint's face had come from her. Indirectly, of course. But still, she was responsible.

So she was responsible for fixing them.

Quint watched her work. It must have seemed odd, her gloved fingers touching him so close to his eyes. But he didn't flinch and he didn't say anything, and that bothered her almost as much as his steady gaze. She felt like he could see through her, and that bothered her too. She had loved that about him when she was younger, but she had become extremely private over the years. She valued that privacy. It was part of her. She didn't want to change it now.

When she finished, she rubbed an additional numbing agent across his skin. He would be sore for days because of what she had done. Field medicine wasn't nearly as good as medicine at any starbase.

"You're going to need to see a real surgeon," she said as she removed her gloves and dropped them into the bin she'd built into the cruiser. "You'll need a double-check on my work."

"Your work is fine," Quint said, his words slightly mangled because the numbing agent made it hard for him to move the muscles in his cheek.

"No, it's not," Squishy said. "You'll have terrible scars if you don't see someone soon. I don't have the equipment to properly fix the skin. I'm going to do a scan for somewhere nearby that has good medical facilities. I'll change our course and drop you there."

He sat up, put his hand up as if he was going to touch his face, and then clearly changed his mind. "Then what will happen to you?"

"I'll stay until your surgery is over," she lied.

He smiled—or tried to. It looked a bit lopsided because of the numbing agent. "No you won't, Rosealma. You'll leave the minute they take me into the facility, not that it matters. The Empire is looking for you and they will find you."

She went cold. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that before we left, I let the authorities know that you were the one who blew the station. I gave them the identification information for this ship. They'll track you, find you, and put you in prison, Rose."

She rubbed her hands together. Her palms were wet. She had gone from cold to a cold sweat in the space of a few seconds. "Why would you do that?"

"You killed Cloris," Quint said.

"Not according to imperial law, I didn't," Squishy said, then realized she was admitting to the explosions. "And there's no proof I did anything wrong."

"There wouldn't have been," he said, "if you had gone directly to your evac ship, Rose. But you didn't. You came here."

"I explained that," she said.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "You did."

Twenty-one Years Earlier

Sixteen hours after Quint brought food, Rosealma managed to shut down the experiment. It had taken all kinds of finagling. She thought she had shut it down six hours before, but she hadn't. Testing and retesting and even more testing showed her something was still pulsing.

She had to go back to the earliest experiments to figure out how to turn the damn thing off. She had to go back to that afternoon when they lost Professor Holmes in one of the simplest stealth tech experiments ever done.

Rosealma—a post-doc—had been the one to finally shut down that experiment, and she was the one who shut down this one.

And if someone asked her to explain exactly how she did it, she wouldn't be able to do so. Normally she had a very orderly mind, but not this afternoon or evening or whenever the hell it had become. Her expanded mind felt like it was becoming part of the stealth tech, like it was stretching into a variety of dimensions, and that was when she realized what the pulses were—an attempt to reach those dimensions.

She had been trying to shut down a cloak, and that hadn't worked. But when she shut down the device that could reach outside of this dimension—when she had actually looked at the experiment as something that crossed both space and time—she was able to deactivate it.

She still wasn't sure she had shut it all down—she wasn't sure they *could* shut it down. Not after what they had done. But she had disabled it or made it inactive, at least for the time being.

Then she had sent the others out, asked for a meeting with the head of the base via vid conference, and told him that this device, this cloak that her people had created, needed to be put somewhere far away from human beings. It would have to be an area of space where there was no possibility of human beings ever traveling through it, and certainly not somewhere that human beings would colonize.

He said he understood. He said the military would find such a place. She gave instructions for transport, made him swear that he wouldn't destroy the base with the device in it—explaining, once again, the disaster—and then she'd left it to him.

She evacuated like everyone else had, and trusted the military to take care of it.

Only later did she realize that they had followed part of her instruction, but not all of it.

They had taken the device away before destroying the military base. They blew up the base, but first they made sure that no stealth tech was on board.

And they didn't abandon the experiments at all.

Instead, they moved the experiments to an even more remote site, did not let the scientists working on them have their families anywhere nearby, and made everyone who worked around stealth tech sign waivers in case of "accidental death or disappearance."

But Rosealma didn't find out about that for a year. She was too busy, testifying at the various courts martial and being investigated herself for some kind of negligence.

Eventually, she was cleared, and then she was offered a new job: Director of Stealth Tech Research.

And that made her furious.

Now

Squishy used cleaning solution on her hands, then cleaned her surgical instruments. She didn't put them away, however. She still needed to run them through the sonic cleaner. But she didn't want to leave Quint alone in the cockpit.

He was sitting up. His skin looked raw from the cleaners she had used on it. The cuts dotted his face. They weren't as bad as they had been, but they would scar without the proper treatment. And they would hurt when the numbing agent wore off. She could still give him something, knock him out, take him to some place on her own. And she was considering it.

"You came here too," she said, continuing the conversation.

He had said she'd made a mistake coming to this ship; she could argue that he made the same mistake.

She said, "It would have been easier for you to evacuate. You had already given the authorities my information. There was no reason for you to join me."

He gave her a hurt look. "You need me."

He had said that in the past, and it never failed to provoke her. It angered her now. She didn't need him. She had never needed him.

She had no idea why he thought she did.

"Why do I need you?" she asked, unable to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

"Because I'm the only person who can prevent you from disappearing into the bowels of the Empire's prison system."

"You sound like I've already been tried and convicted," she said.

He shrugged. "Times are different now. You destroyed government property. Military property. That was classified as a weapons research site, Rose. They don't need to try you. They just need to show a few select judges that you're guilty."

Her eyes narrowed. "You think they'd charge me with murder?"

"Probably not," he said. "They'll probably charge you with treason. Which is worse."

She swallowed in spite of herself. "Murder can carry a death penalty. How is treason worse?"

He looked down at his hands. "There are some things, Rose, that you don't want to live through."

She felt even colder than she had. She hadn't quite bargained for all of this. Somehow she had thought she would get away. Or maybe she had thought she would die on that station.

She had certainly made contingency plans for her own death. She had told the others how to get away if she didn't show up. And she hadn't thought of capture.

So what made her assume she wouldn't show up? She had to have assumed, deep down, that she would die. Because dying was certainly no less than she deserved, not considering all that she had done.

Hundreds—quite literally hundreds—of people would still be alive if she hadn't gone into stealth tech, if she hadn't realized that no one was thinking about stealth tech correctly.

She even recalled the moment of realization. She remembered when it all started.

Thirty-two Years Earlier

Rosealma had been naïve and terrified, outside her element, in a school on Hector Prime, a school on the ground, in real gravity, in a place where she couldn't just float away.

She had chosen the Mehkeydo Academy because it was the best planet-bound school in the sector. She had grown up on *The Bounty*, a multinational cargo vessel, that never stopped anywhere for longer than a few weeks. She had thought with the ignorance of youth that staying planet-bound would be interesting.

Instead, it had been stifling. She felt heavy and awkward and stupid, when she was none of those things. Because of her spacer background, she was the thinnest girl in class, and one of the smartest too. She had scored 100 on her boards, something no cargo monkey had ever done, and that made her eligible for full scholarships from the best schools in the Enterran Empire.

She had chosen Mehkeydo Academy, and for nearly two years, she believed she had chosen incorrectly.

Until that moment in class.

No one saw the change occur, because hardly anyone looked at her. Most people thought her odd—and from their standpoint, she was. Even the professor, Erasmus Dane, rarely looked at her.

He was a strange one too, that Dane. A highly regarded professor of Ancient Technologies, Dane loved anything old and out of date. He carried an ancient wooden pointer stick in his hand, tapping the metal tip on any surface to prove his point. He wore tweed jackets and wool trousers and always smelled a bit fusty, as if his clothes were as old as his obsessions.

And one of his obsessions was stealth tech. He called it the ultimate lost technology. In his introductory class, Technologies and the Ancient World, he explored the way that human beings—from the beginnings of known civilization on old Earth—gained and lost knowledge. His focus in that class was on a group known as the Romans, who built things like roads and aqueducts, and whose engineering abilities flummoxed succeeding cultures for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years.

By the end of that semester, he'd spoken about a legend of amazing ships and how he saw the people who flew them as the Romans that the Enterran Empire couldn't quite emulate.

His mention of the fleet was the first time Rosealma had heard of it. The ships were called Dignity Vessels and they sounded magical: they were big and black and swooped like birds. They housed five hundred to a thousand to ten thousand crew members. They had weapons that could destroy entire planets. And they could vanish in the middle of battle, only to reappear at the exact right moment, and destroy entire squadrons.

Rosealma loved the Dignity Vessel stories. She particularly loved how heroic the leaders of the Dignity Vessels sounded. But most of all she loved the stories of the Dignity Vessel fleet—how it was a hundred or five hundred or a thousand strong and how it never went back to Old Earth where it came from. Instead, it traveled ever forward, on a mission to save the worlds beyond the stars, fighting for the underdog, saving peoples and cultures that couldn't save themselves.

Dane claimed these stories had a basis in fact, and urged his students to find the truth. He had them dig through ancient records, through texts and translations, finding any mention of Dignity Vessels and their crew.

Rosealma loved the assignment and spent most of her semester on it. She discovered that no ship had ten thousand crew members, and that the stories of the Dignity Vessels weren't always heroic.

But she also discovered that the ability to appear and disappear in a battle wasn't magical at all. It was technology based, and once upon a time, the Enterran Empire had known how to do the same thing.

The Enterran Empire called that ability stealth technology. And Rosealma moved from a study of the Dignity Vessels to a study of the history of stealth technology long before she took Dane's Lost Technologies Advanced Seminar.

Unlike most of her classmates, Rosealma had grown up on ships. And she knew that such a technology would change everything. It would make life both easier and more difficult.

She had been moving away from a degree in history toward a degree in science when she had her epiphany in Dane's class. One of her other history professors told her she had a scientist's mind—she didn't like the inaccuracies in the historical record; she wanted to find a way to ensure that the historical record was accurate. She wanted precision and certainty and rigor, things that the study of history could never ever have.

In that fateful lecture, Dane paced, as he always did, three-quarters performer and one-quarter professor, using his ancient pointer stick like a weapon. Any student who even appeared to doze got the stick slammed against a desk, making the entire class jump to attention. He would lean on the stick to make a point, slap it against his hand as he contemplated an idea. He would use the stick as a superweapon against the tiny holographic Dignity Vessels he surrounded himself with, creating a ripple in the hologram as the stick sailed through it.

On that particular morning, he'd created an entire battlefield. Ships of various types fighting over nothing, weapons firing into the pretend space around him. Dane stood in the middle of the chaos, an invisible giant to the ships.

Rosealma watched the Dignity Vessels. They were hard to miss, with their birdlike shape and long wingspan. They tilted and moved like predators, larger than every other ship, although Rosealma doubted that was how it had been. Just because one culture had a big ship didn't mean others lacked big ships as well.

But that wasn't the first mistake she'd noted in the professor's presentation.

Dane spent the morning discussing stealth technology. The Dignity Vessels winked in and out of the battlefield like lights turning on and off. When they disappeared, weapons fire would go through the empty space as if the ships had never been there.

Based on his research, Dane said he believed that stealth tech cloaked the vessel all at once, making it invisible—not just to the instruments on the various ships, which was the way that stealth tech worked on existing ships—but also to the naked eye. So anyone who looked through a porthole saw the blackness of space instead of the outline of a Dignity Vessel.

Hands shot up, of course, as their owners wondered how the shot missed the vessel then. And Dane, who had probably given this lecture a hundred times in his career, had an answer before the question even got asked.

"The vessels cloaked," he said, "and then they maneuvered out of the way. They returned to the same position before decloaking, to throw off their enemies."

But Professor Dane had never served on a ship. Rosealma had checked his curriculum vitae before taking the class, and she had noted his lack of expertise in actual space travel. Dane had taken vacation trips off Hector Prime, but he had never lived on a vessel, trained on a vessel, flown a vessel, or spent more than a few days on one.

He really had no idea how modern vessels worked, let alone how ancient ones did.

And sometimes, Rosealma believed, it didn't matter how much someone understood an intellectual concept: that was no substitute for hands-on experience.

Those thoughts flashed through her mind as she looked at the miniature simulation—and that was when she had her epiphany. The Dignity Vessel's stealth technology wasn't a traditional cloak. No captain would have his ship execute four maneuvers when he could execute two.

In a battle, time was everything. The captain would cloak the vessel and move away from the spot where he cloaked, never to return. But he would never cloak the vessel, move out of the way, then return and uncloak. It simply wasn't logical. And if that was how the Dignity Vessels' cloaks really operated, and if that was the pre-

scribed maneuver, the ships would have been easy to defeat. All the enemy had to do was surround that spot in space and wait for the Vessel to return.

But the Vessels didn't always return. Sometimes they did move away. Sometimes they returned to the same spot moments later, and sometimes they returned days later.

Either the cloaks used power efficiently, allowing a Vessel to remain hidden for days at a time (and if that was the case, why didn't the Vessel simply leave the area?) or the stealth technology wasn't a cloak as anyone in the Enterran Empire understood it.

Rosealma went back to her primary sources, found the references that had bothered her, and in the next class asked Dane about them. She cited them, then brought them up beside her holographically as she asked her question.

"Professor," she said, "eyewitnesses throughout the known history of the Dignity Vessels reported weapons fire hitting the area where the vessels had been seconds—sometimes nanoseconds—after the Vessel engaged its stealth drive. No ship can maneuver out of the way that quickly. Couldn't the stealth technology have worked in a different way?"

"You're assuming that their technology is similar to ours," he said. "They could maneuver faster than any other ship."

"Then why, when they were in trouble in battle, didn't they just maneuver out of the way without cloaking? If they could travel much faster than all of the other ships, wasting energy on a cloak makes no sense."

He gave her a patronizing smile. "I assure you the ships couldn't have operated any other way."

"But you're assuming the stealth tech is a cloak," she said.

"What else could it be?" he asked, pretending at patience, but clearly annoyed that she had questioned his intellectual prowess.

"I don't know," she said. "But—"

"Of course you don't know," he said. "None of us know. Stealth technology is lost."

"But you said our ships used it in the early days of the Empire."

His pretence at patience left. "Look at the histories, young lady, then talk to me. We didn't use the stealth technology. It malfunctioned and nearly destroyed our fleet. The Dignity Vessels were much stronger ships than ours, built by better engineers, run by gifted scientists. They could adjust for the various stresses of the cloak. We could not."

Then he turned away from her and moved to a different part of the lecture. And he never ever called on her in class again.

But it didn't matter, because she knew he was wrong. He didn't understand several things about space-faring vessels. Not deep down. He had no idea how terrifying it got when a ship's energy reserves faded or the power system collapsed. He didn't seem to understand that the kind of maneuverability he described was impossible outside of FTL drives. The Empire had FTL drives, had had them for centuries, and never used them for the maneuvers that Professor Dane described.

Once engaged, all FTL drives forced ships to travel great distances in a matter of minutes. Returning to the same spot in a battlefield was ridiculous, but even if it

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was militarily recommended, it would be difficult after engaging an FTL drive—particularly in the minute or two mentioned in account after account after account from people in different time periods, from different sectors, people who had never spoken to each other, and indeed, couldn't have spoken to each other because their cultures wouldn't connect in a meaningful way for another two thousand years.

"It sounds like he has a different definition of magic than you do," said Edward Quintana. Quintana—Quint to his friends—had decided mid-semester that Rosealma interested him. He sat next to her in class, walked her across the quad, and had been angling to spend more time with her.

He was good-looking for someone planet-bound, with a heavy bone structure and muscle mass. He was both broader and taller than she was used to, and it took a while for her to become accustomed to his strong features. Planetside, he was considered handsome, his blue-black hair skimming his strong jawline, accenting rather than hiding his thick neck.

On the *Bounty*, he would be considered too big to be beautiful, clumsy and lumbering, without the grace of those who spent at least half of their time in zero-G.

"Definition of magic?" she asked, trying not to sound too defensive, although she felt that way.

They had just left the Lost Technologies building, which was smack in the middle of campus. Hector Prime's sun, considered weak by some standards, was in the center of the sky, and a pale yellow light coated everything. Students sat outside, shoes and coats off, reclining on blankets or the specially made grass the university had planted to avoid Hector Prime's environmental regulations. The grass was blue, rather than green, which irritated more traditional students, but Rosealma liked it, particularly on days like this when the weak sun made the grass sparkle.

"Yeah," Quint said, taking her arm and leading her around a pile of shirts and pants. Half a dozen students were jumping naked in a nearby fountain, squealing as the cold water hit their skin.

Rosealma didn't think it that warm, but she was used to the constant temperature on board the *Bounty*. Any change in temperature took her days to adjust to.

"Join me for a beer and I'll explain," he said.

She smiled. He'd been asking her out for weeks—beers, lunches, dinners—and she'd been saying no.

"Oh, what the hell," she said, and followed him to the student union.

It was a clear building designed to reflect the sun's rays, making the building look like it glowed from within. The interior was surprisingly dim, which made it less comfortable for Rosealma than she would have liked.

Quint led her to the beer bar and before she could stop him, he bought her something dark and rich and smelling faintly of cherries. Then he led her through a tunnel she hadn't known existed into an open space inside the building. It felt like she was stepping inside a ray of sunshine, and it took her breath away.

"What's this?" she asked.

"One of the Academy's many secrets," he said, pulling out a chair for her. She sat, then took her sweet-smelling beer. The scent told her it had been brewed on campus—the food services majors always experimented with new forms of old products. She took a tentative sip. The beer didn't taste as bad as she'd thought it would. In fact, it had a tang that she liked.

Quint smiled at her, then raised his eyebrows just a little. "And that," he said, "is another of the Academy's many secrets."

She laughed, then eased back in her chair. She didn't relax enough here. It was hard for her. On the *Bounty*, she used to go to the zero-G playground and float for relaxation. Here, the zero-G areas were either research intensive or by appointment only.

"So, magic," she said. "You're saying I believe in magic."

"Both of you do," he said. "And you and Professor Dane are arguing about whose belief is right."

She frowned. She did not believe in magic. She believed there were things in the universe she did not understand, things that functioned in ways she couldn't explain, but that didn't mean those things were magic.

Still, she didn't want to argue with Quint. Not yet, anyway.

"Enlighten me," she said.

"Professor Dane believes that ships can move quicker in a microburst than they should be able to," Quint said. "He thinks that the Dignity Vessels have a drive different than, maybe even faster than, an FTL, and combined with the cloak, that makes them magical. When you asked your question, you threatened to destroy his magical theory and it unnerved him."

"I thought I just nipped at his pride by questioning his expertise," she said.

"That too," Quint said, cradling his mug. "But you also believe in magic."

She resisted the urge to cross her arms. "Really?"

Quint nodded. "You believe that a ship could remain in place, become invisible to the naked eye, and not be affected by weaponry. That's magic."

She shook her head. "I didn't say that."

"Then how could those ships become invisible and not deflect a direct shot without the eyewitnesses all over the known universe being wrong?"

"I can think of two ways off the top of my head," she said. "In the first, the ship absorbs the shot and takes the energy from it, creating the illusion of the shot going through."

"Like it created the illusion of disappearing?" he asked.

"Something like that," she said. "Or it could go slightly out of phase."

"Out of phase?" he asked.

"Move just a hair into another dimension."

He laughed. "As if that's possible."

"It's more likely than a ship maneuvering the way that the professor describes," she said. "It's one of the theories of time travel, that people can move out of time for just a moment, and then come back. There've been experiments in a controlled environment that show such a thing is possible."

"And there've been experiments that postulate a drive faster than FTL," he said. "It's all theory, which goes back to belief, which goes to magic."

"You are stubborn," she said.

"And so are you," he said. "Why do you want to prove the professor wrong?"

"Besides the fact that he's a pompous ass?" she asked.

Quint's grin grew. "Besides that, yes."

"Because my maneuver—my magic, if you will—is simpler," she said.

Quint set his beer down. His smile remained, but changed just a little, as if what she said made him think.

"Simpler?" he asked.

She nodded, then leaned forward. "We're talking about a fleet of vessels so advanced that they've survived away from their home base for centuries. These vessels rebuild on the run, they move from place to place, they're like a living city that's constantly changing. I've lived like that, although not to the same extreme."

Quint leaned forward too. He was closer to her than she expected, which made her breath catch for just a moment. She could feel something between them, something electric.

Something unseen, unmeasured, and untested. Yet she knew it was there—and more than that: she knew that he knew. Without asking. Without confirming. Without precision and rigor, she had certainty.

"To live like that," she said, surprised that her voice didn't betray her sudden emotion, "you have to be efficient. No movement can be wasted. Every command does double-duty. The ship has to perform at the top of its ability with every single thing it does. And Professor Dane's theory isn't efficient. It might be logical, but in practice, it would use more resources than it would save."

"Even if it saved the ship," Quint said.

"Especially if it saved the ship," she said. "That ship is part of the fleet and the fleet is an entity in and of itself. Lose too many ships and there is no fleet. So you must develop some kind of system to save individual ships that is efficient, quick, and easy to execute. Professor Dane's system is none of those things."

"And yours is?" Quint asked.

She shrugged and leaned back, grabbing her mug of beer like a shield. "He's had decades to think about this. I've been working on my theory for two whole days."

Quint stared at her for a long moment, as if he was sizing her up. Then he said, "You do know that there's an entire scientific wing here devoted to recovering lost technologies."

"For science majors," she said.

"Why aren't you one?" he asked. "You seem to have the interest. You could see if your out-of-phase thing is even possible."

"When I'm a post-doc," she said.

"What is it Professor Dane says?" Quint asked. "Romans weren't built in a day."

"Rome," Rosealma said. "He said Rome."

But she wasn't thinking about the ancient saying that Professor Dane had taught them. She was thinking about efficiency and cloaks and cargo ships.

She could study something here that would actually have a use on the *Bounty*. If she could discover how to replicate stealth technology, cargo ships could travel through difficult and dangerous parts of the sector, and deliver goods on the far side of the known universe. It would increase profits and safety all at the same time.

"You hadn't thought of studying science, huh?" Quint asked.

She smiled at him for the very first time—a real smile, not a polite one to get him to leave her alone. "You want me to study magic."

"Hell, yeah," he said. "Because I believe you're actually onto something, and I'd hate to work on your theory all alone."

Now

Squishy had forgotten that Quint had been there from the beginning. She had forgotten until just now.

Then perhaps it was fitting that he was here on *The Dane*, the ship she named for that incorrect professor to remind herself how often she had been incorrect, despite her arrogance.

Or maybe—like Professor Dane—because of it.

She cleared her throat, set her surgical instruments down, then let her hands hover over them as if she was going to use them as weapons. She didn't glance at *The Dane's* control panels, and she didn't look at exactly where they were going. She didn't want to think about that, at least not yet.

Nor did she want to think about all the implications of this conversation. But she had to think about it.

She couldn't put off thinking about it any longer.

"How do you know that there are some things I don't want to live through?" she asked Quint.

He finally touched his face, his fingers briefly brushing against the cuts. Then he stopped as if he realized he was violating an instruction. Which he was. She had asked him not to touch the wounds, even though she had known that would be hard for him.

"I could say that I know you, Rose. You would have believed that once." He clenched his hands into fists, then flattened them against his thighs.

The feeling had to have been coming back to his face. But she didn't offer him any more numbing agent. She wanted to wait.

"What do you mean I would have believed that once?" she asked.

He shook his head slightly, not looking at her. "You never really gave me much thought, did you, Rose?"

"You're being elliptical," she said. "You know I hate that."

And he did know that. He was right: he knew more about her than she knew about him. She hadn't bothered to learn him in the same kind of depth that he had learned her.

She used to attribute that to the fact he wanted the relationship more. But she hadn't learned Turtle well either. Squishy liked people. She liked being around them. But they didn't interest her as much as ideas or science or medicine.

Quint sighed. "I work in Imperial Intelligence, Rose."

She frowned, suddenly feeling confused. "You used to work in military intelligence. Then you moved on. On the station, you were head of security. You told me yourself."

He shook his head ever so slightly. "I didn't tell you that. I implied it. You didn't really care enough to investigate."

He was right: she hadn't cared. She had been more concerned with keeping him away from her than she had been with the intricacies of his job.

"What does that mean, Imperial Intelligence?" she asked. "And how is that different from military intelligence?"

He let out a small sigh. "It's different in degree, Rose. Military intelligence is child's play compared to what I do. I was promoted after you left. I run an entire intelligence division now. I have more information at my fingertips than you could ever imagine."

Her stomach turned, although she wasn't sure why. Something about what he was saying disturbed her, and disturbed her so deeply that she didn't want to look at it closely.

"So what are you doing here with me?" she asked. "How come you're not on one of those ships or contacting the Empire or something?"

"You're my Achilles' heel, Rose. You know that reference? It's not from Professor Dane's class, but it's from the same department. Lost cultures. Cultures so old we only have stories about them."

"I don't remember the story," she said, "but I know what the phrase means."

And it frightened her. How could she be his weakness? They hadn't seen each other in decades.

"I should have reported you," he said softly. "I should have reported you the moment *The Dane* crossed into Enterran territory."

It felt like her heart stopped. Then she realized she had forgotten to take a breath. "What do you mean?"

"Squishy," he said, standing up. He started to come toward her, then seemed to think the better of it and stopped. "How can you let them call you Squishy? You have a beautiful name. You're a beautiful woman, Rose."

Her hands floated toward the control panel. She was trying to leave, as if she could escape him by hitting some commands on the panel. She couldn't do that. Not without being obvious anyway.

She clasped her hands behind her back. She just didn't want to listen to him. This

was the kind of thing that made her uncomfortable, that had always made her uncomfortable.

She raised her gaze to his. He was watching her closely, and she didn't know exactly what he saw. Did he see how uncomfortable she was? Did he see her slow understanding of what he meant?

He knew she had lived outside the Enterran Empire. He knew her nickname. He knew much more about her than she had ever known about him.

"For the first time in your life," he said, "when you left Vallevu, you didn't leave it entirely. You stayed in touch. You let some people know how you were doing. You didn't say much in the messages, but the messages came from the Nine Planets Alliance."

She gripped the edge of the control panel. Had she made a mistake coming here? Not for herself, but for all the others? For the work she had been doing back at the Nine Planets? Had she let the Empire in when Boss and the team had worked so hard to keep the Empire out?

"Don't worry," he said, "I couldn't track you inside the Alliance. They have good protections in place."

Her heart started pounding. She had forgotten that he used to do that, answer her questions even when she hadn't spoken them.

"But I have a hunch I know what got you out to the Nine Planets," he said. "There've been credible rumors that the Nine Planets has made breakthroughs in stealth tech. I know enough about stealth tech to know that the person who understands it best is you."

She almost denied it. She didn't understand it best, not any more. Now there was an entire department of people who worked with the *anacapa* drive, who had worked on it all of their lives, working with knowledge passed down from generations. Now she was behind in her understanding of the technology.

Although not in her understanding of the technology that the Empire was developing. Theirs only opened a small crack in the *anacapa* drive. That's why imperial stealth tech consistently malfunctioned and killed. Because imperial stealth tech tried to harness a burning log with a rope. Sometimes the rope held for just a moment, but eventually it would get burned as well. Everyone who worked in imperial stealth tech believed that the log was the technology. They didn't even see or understand the fire.

"I wanted you back here," he said, extending his hands. She looked at them, then looked at him, keeping her gaze level, showing as little emotion as she possibly could. He was scaring her. He probably knew how much he was scaring her, and by extending his hands, he tried to calm her.

Slowly, he let his hands drop.

"I wanted you working for us again," he said. "You know so much and things have gone so wrong."

"You're the one who leaked that information," she said. Anger she hadn't even realized she was feeling made her voice tremble. "You're the one."

He nodded. "I figured it would bring you back. And it did."

One Year Earlier

Squishy stood in front of the schematics for the small *anacapa* drive displayed on the table before her. She had her hands clasped behind her back. Six people crowded around her. The room was long and narrow, adjacent to her office, an office she rarely used. Mostly, she was in the various labs, working on a dozen projects.

Once upon a time, she supervised all of the work on the space station, but she

couldn't any longer. Too much was being done. So much, in fact, that Boss—or to be more accurate, the Lost Souls Corporation—had recently purchased another space station for different kinds of work. Squishy didn't know what happened at the new place except in theory. Most of the work there was dedicated to historical and anthropological research, as well as ground sciences like geology, things that held no interest for her.

What interested her—what had always interested her—was this technology. More than biology, more than all of the medicine she studied, she wanted to know about *anacapa* drives.

She stood back from the schematics, then ordered up a holographic version. It rose and floated above her. She tapped the screen so that she got a three-dimensional model of the drive. It floated next to the schematics, about the size of her fist, encased in black. She ordered the casing removed and studied the drive.

It looked wrong to her, but she wasn't the expert. The people beside her were, but the person whose opinion mattered was Bradley Taylor.

Taylor had come from the *Ivoire*, the working Dignity Vessel that Boss had found four years before. He was young and when he first came to the Nine Planets, he hadn't been old enough to get work in the *Ivoire's* engineering department. But he had a knack for *anacapa* drives. He loved them as much as Squishy did, and once here, he had become her de facto right-hand man.

The *Ivoire's* crew had scattered over the years. Many stayed with the ship, but some—like Taylor—didn't ever want to travel by spaceship again. They certainly didn't want to be on a ship with a functioning (and occasionally employed) *anacapa* drive.

Still, Taylor had valuable skills, and he wanted to use them. Squishy was more than willing to put him to work in her labs. The design before her was mostly his.

"It doesn't look complete to me," Squishy said, directing her comments to Taylor. The others listened.

"It does seem small," he said, "but I can assure you that it works."

She programmed both holographs so that they revolved. Then they turned upside down, moving in all three dimensions. She watched, but that discomfort remained.

She shook her head. "Something's wrong. I just can't tell what it is."

Taylor didn't seem upset. Instead, he leaned into the images and watched them move as if they held the answers.

"I wish we could run some tests," he said.

"No tests until I have some idea that this will work," she said. Too many people had died in "tests."

No one from the *Ivoire* objected either. The only reason they were at the base was because their *anacapa* drive had malfunctioned a long, long time ago.

"We know that the *anacapa* part will work," said Sadie Juarez. She had come from one of the top universities in the Nine Planets. She was a brilliant theorist, but she still hadn't grasped the dangers of the research. "Maybe there's some kind of way we can isolate the experiment . . ."

She let her voice trail off so that everyone knew what she was saying, even though she hadn't finished the thought.

"We're not the Empire," said Ward Zauft. He had helped Squishy since she'd started her research at Lost Souls. He was thin and wiry, had too much energy, and was always keeping an eye out for problems in experiments. She liked that the most about him. "We don't let eighty-five people die just because we believe the experiment will work."

Squishy nodded, then frowned. Eighty-five was a specific number, and it was too small to encompass all of the people who had died in the last few decades.

She turned toward him. "Eighty-five?"

"Haven't you heard? That's the latest loss. Eighty-five people because some stealth tech experiment went awry." He wasn't even looking at her. He was clearly thinking about the drive in front of him, not the news he was passing on.

"Where did you see that?" she asked.

Something in her tone seemed to catch his attention. He looked away from the rotating drives, his gaze meeting hers. A slight frown creased his forehead.

"It got leaked and made some of the science news sites just this week," he said. "They said the eighty-five people who died were the latest tragic accident in a program plagued by them."

"I heard it too," Juarez said. "The story said that the numbers couldn't be confirmed but that maybe as many as eight hundred people have died in stealth tech related experiments in the past twenty years."

Squishy was shaking. She knew of the first two hundred of the dead. She had a hunch that eight hundred figure was too small.

"So they're warning people away?" she asked. "Telling them not to work for the imperial science programs?"

"It wasn't that kind of news," Juarez said. "It was my impression that they were just interested in the statistics, nothing more."

Statistics. Squishy let out a small breath. "I don't want anyone running an experiment on this until someone who has worked with *anacapa* drives for a decade or more looks at it."

Then she excused herself and went to her office. She felt lightheaded and off balance.

The Empire was still experimenting with stealth tech, even after she and Boss had tried to shut them down. And people were still dying in the experiments. Over and over again, people were dying.

What would it take to convince the Empire that stealth tech was too dangerous to pursue? Or could it be persuaded?

Maybe she and Boss had been on the right track six years before. Maybe they should do everything they could to destroy the research. All of the research.

But that would mean destroying the scientists, too, and Squishy couldn't do that. Destroyed research and a large accident—one that ruined everything but didn't kill anyone—might make the Empire think twice about continuing the research, at least in the direction it was going. It might force some of the scientists out.

She leaned against her door, looked at her office, saw the neglect. A sweater she hadn't worn in months hung over the back of her chair. A cup that hadn't been washed in probably that long sat on one side of her desk.

She didn't like the way her thoughts were going, but she recognized the feeling. She couldn't keep working here while people were dying back there. Particularly if they were following protocols she had developed decades before.

The scientists with the Empire's program were following faulty assumptions with old information, and that wasn't just dangerous to them. It was dangerous to the entire sector.

Something had to be done. But what?

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Now

Quint ran his hand through his hair. He stood and walked toward her. It took all of Squishy's strength not to back away.

She had forgotten how big he was, how muscular. She had always found that both appealing and intimidating. Only now, the appealing part was gone. She felt smaller than she ever had beside him.

"When *The Dane* entered imperial space," he said, "I was actually hopeful. I thought you had come back to help us."

"I did," she said softly.

"No, you didn't," he said. "You came back here to destroy us."

One Year Earlier

She found Boss next to her latest project, a reconstructed Dignity Vessel that Boss had deliberately kept nameless. Boss was thin and ropy, preoccupied, her hair cut short, new lines near her eyes. But she didn't seem tired, even though she was working impossible hours. Lately, Boss seemed energized, as if the Dignity Vessel projects had revitalized a part of her.

The Dignity Vessel itself dwarfed everything else in the bay. The ship was huge. Squishy always forgot how big the Vessels were, even though she had now been inside several of them. The first Dignity Vessel, all those years ago, had been a derelict, floating in space, and even though it had taken a long time to dive it, the ship hadn't seemed as big as these. Space itself made everything seem small.

Since Squishy had come to work at Lost Souls, she had worked on five derelict ships. Then the *Ivoire* had arrived and some members of the crew had helped repair one of the five derelicts. This ship was another found ship, and it needed a lot of interior work, which Boss was supervising.

"We did it once before," Squishy said as she walked beside Boss, staring up at the Dignity Vessel. The ship jutted above them, shading them from the lights at the top of the bay.

Boss stopped walking. Squishy had made her entire presentation while they examined the exterior of the Dignity Vessel. She had felt a bit uncomfortable, arguing that they should take a team into imperial space, with the mission of destroying stealth tech. She was half-hoping that Boss would take in a Dignity Vessel on a trial run, maybe even go in with the *anacapa* engaged, use the high-powered weaponry, and destroy the base that Squishy had discovered.

But Boss was frowning, and that wasn't a good sign. "Why do you care? The Empire kills people in a variety of ways. We can't stop that. We're working to keep the balance of power in the sector, to keep the Empire from moving out here. That's more than enough."

Squishy swallowed. She had thought Boss would understand. But Squishy had forgotten how Boss could overlook disturbing things. She had done that on their first dives in a Dignity Vessel, ignoring Squishy's warning, and leading to the breach that had hurt their relationship for years.

"People are dying because of me," Squishy said.

"Nonsense," Boss said. "You haven't been part of stealth tech research for decades, at least not in the Empire."

"But I'm the one who took them down this path. I'm the one who started all these experiments. Everyone who died since then died because of me."

Boss shook her head.

"Don't be dismissive," Squishy snapped. "In the past, you've dismissed me and that was a mistake."

"One mistake," Boss said. "A big one, I grant you. But just one. And I've apologized repeatedly. This is different."

"How is this different?" Squishy asked.

"It's not personal, Squishy," Boss said. "I know you think it is, but it's not. A lot of people can hold the blame for all those deaths, including the people who continue the experiments in light of the disasters they're causing. It's not about you."

Squishy straightened. "You don't understand—"

"I do," Boss said. "I've lost people because of mistakes I've made. I understand. But the worst thing we can do is go into the Empire."

"You did it," Squishy said. "You went to Vaycehn, and found the *Ivoire*."

Boss nodded. "And it could have been a disaster. They didn't catch us that time, but they might this time. We're fugitives."

"Not all of us," Squishy said. "I still get my military pension. It goes to my home in Valleu."

Boss didn't say a word, but she was clearly struggling to remain silent.

"I can go back in with a team," Squishy said before Boss could say anything. "We can use the same explosives that I developed a few years ago. I did the research, Boss. The Empire has confined stealth tech to one gigantic base. We get rid of the base, we get rid of the tech."

"They're not stupid enough to keep all of the research on that one base," Boss said. "It's backed up somewhere."

"And once we find where the backups are kept, we launch the mission. I could go back, revamp my credentials and work in the lab until we're ready to launch the attack. They wouldn't suspect anything."

Boss snorted. "You haven't worked in stealth tech in decades and then you return? How is that not suspicious?"

"I would blame the leaked studies," Squishy straightened. "I'm on the record—several legal records—protesting the way the experiments were conducted. That was decades ago. I would have complete credibility if I went back and stated that I wanted to return to correct the mistakes and make sure no one died."

"And they'd hire you?" Boss asked.

"They asked me to rejoin when I brought them the first Dignity Vessel," Squishy said. Squishy had claimed the vessel she had taken from Boss on that fateful trip for the imperial government to get it out of Boss's hands. It had been a reaction to Boss's high-handed decision-making on that trip. The decision-making that led to the "one mistake" that Boss had just mentioned.

"And you said no," Boss said. "That was years ago. Things change."

Squishy shook her head. "I'm still considered the godmother of stealth tech research. I'm mentioned in a ton of studies. I'd like to fix that."

"And what?" Boss asked. "Give them the *anacapa* drive?"

"Make sure they can never catch us," Squishy said. "Make sure that their research goes in a different direction."

"You can't control research," Boss said. "You know that."

"But you can alter it," Squishy said.

"And if you get caught?" Boss asked. "What then? They'll get you to tell them about the *anacapa* drive."

Squishy shook her head. "I'd die first."

"Don't be melodramatic," Boss said.

Squishy sighed. "I still don't have a great working knowledge of the *anacapa* drive. It's vast and complex and I certainly couldn't build one from scratch. If the Empire

catches me, the only thing they'd get from me is that the drive exists. They'd also learn how powerful it is. They'd learn that they're making a terrible mistake when they try to treat it as a cloak."

"And then they come after us," Boss said.

"They'll come after us eventually," Squishy said.

"No," Boss said and walked away.

Squishy scrambled to keep up. "People are dying, Boss."

"All over the Empire, for all kinds of reasons," Boss said. "Hell, people are dying in the Nine Planets for all kinds of reasons, too. Some are too poor, some are too sick, some still live under repressive regimes. I'm not going in there to rescue those folks. Why should I rescue a bunch of scientists in the middle of the Empire? Scientists who specialize in weapons research, I might add."

Squishy was shaking. Her initial answers—*there might be someone like me; they're important; they're scientists for fuck's sake*—wouldn't be good enough for Boss.

"You wouldn't go in," Squishy said. "I would."

Boss stopped walking and turned around. "So I should send in the only one of us who isn't connected to the *Ivoire* who has any chance of understanding how an *anacapa* drive works."

"There are a lot of people here who understand it as well as I do," Squishy said.

"And they're not all connected to the *Ivoire*."

"But they're not you," Boss said softly. "So my answer stands. No."

She started walking again. Squishy began to follow, then stopped. Boss said no. She rarely revisited decisions, and only when faced with a great deal of evidence that her assumptions were wrong.

Her assumptions weren't wrong here. She was right: this wasn't a Lost Souls mission.

This was a personal mission.

And it was one Squishy would complete. With or without the help of anyone else.

Now

Quint's words offended her. Squishy stood perfectly still, trying to control the anger. "I did not come to destroy you," she said. "People who destroy things kill people."

"You killed Cloris," he said.

"I got everyone out of that facility," Squishy snapped. "Cloris wasn't following orders."

"You didn't either," he said.

She stared at him. She was trembling. He was trembling too. He tried to be calm, but he wasn't. Maybe she *was* seeing him more clearly than she thought.

"I didn't come to destroy you," she said again. "I came to help you."

His face flushed. The wounds disappeared in the redness. He took a step away from her, moving his head at the same time so she couldn't see his eyes.

"That's what I wanted to believe, Rose," he said, clasping his hands behind his back. The posture looked terribly familiar. She did it all the time, and she realized, with a sinking feeling, she had learned it from him. "I wanted to believe that you could stop all of the deaths. Didn't you ever wonder how you got in so easily? Why no one cared that you'd been gone for so many years?"

She had wondered, then chalked it up to the Empire's incompetence. She figured people were watching her, but it didn't matter. She had an entire team, she had a way to contact them if she needed to, and she had no actual work to do until she destroyed the research station. For six months, her work had been blameless, although she'd made a point of stopping those experiments, the ones that would have resulted in someone's death.

He tilted his head back. "I *believed* in you, Rosealma. You're brilliant. I honestly thought you could fix it all."

Her breath caught in her throat. It all fit: how she'd got in, why he kept showing up, asking the occasional question, keeping an eye on her, telling her she was doing well. He had believed in her, and despite herself, she felt sad that she had disappointed him.

"I'm your magic," she said.

He turned, a puzzled expression on his face. He didn't remember the conversation. Of course he didn't. That conversation about magic and beliefs had changed her life. It had just been a moment to him.

"What?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter," she said. "I did fix things, just not the way you wanted."

"You just set them back some, Rosealma. You didn't fix anything at all," he said.

She almost, almost told him about destroying the back-up research, but she didn't. The only thing her people hadn't destroyed was the scientists themselves. Someone destructive would have destroyed them, too. But she wasn't destructive. It would take the scientists years to reconstruct their work, and maybe by then, someone new would come in, someone to tell them about the folly of their ways.

She could send them that researcher. She could send in moles who would direct them away from their own destruction and onto a path that would lead nowhere.

If she ever got out of this.

"What happened to you?" Quint asked softly. "You used to love this work, Rosealma. You didn't believe in destroying anything."

"What happened to me?" she asked. She couldn't believe he had said that.

He didn't remember that either. Apparently, he had remembered all of the wrong things.

Twenty Years Earlier

Rosealma came out of the meeting room and crumpled onto a bench beside the door. She put a hand to her face.

She was tired. She had been tired for more than a year, living and reliving the failed experiment, the problems, the attempted rescue, and finally the shutdown. She had testified and argued and fought. She had wondered if any of it was fair, particularly when the court decided to jail Hansen.

He hadn't followed procedure. He hadn't listened, but he hadn't done anything criminal either. At least, not criminal enough to warrant the kind of punishment he received.

She had argued about that too, although, if she was honest with herself, not as forcefully as she would have if no one had died.

And a lot of people had died.

The ironic thing—the sad thing—was that there was no accurate body count, because there were no bodies. Anyone who had gone missing that day was counted among the dead—by Rosealma, if not by Empire law.

For a while, she kept going back to Vallevu between cases, because that was where her off-site home with Quint was. But eventually she couldn't face it any longer.

She stopped going home. She got an apartment near the courts and she stayed. At first she drank, because she needed her mind on something else. Then she realized if she kept doing that, she would go crazy, so she went back to school.

Medicine provided a good penance. It wasn't stealth tech. It wasn't related to

weapons work at all, and yet it appealed to her scientific mind. It kept her thinking about something else.

She got to think about something else now. She was done. And it felt . . . odd.

"Rosealma?"

The voice belonged to Quint. She didn't want to face him now. But she could hear footsteps coming closer.

She steeled her shoulders, rubbed a hand over her face, and stood.

Quint had come down the hallway, but he was alone. "Did they take your recommendations?"

"No," she said. "But they offered me a job. They want me to be Director of Stealth Tech Research."

He came over to her and put his arm around her. Somehow it didn't feel comforting. "Good. You can make changes when you get back to the project. Sometimes the best changes are made from within anyway."

She stopped walking so suddenly that his arm pushed her forward. He dropped his arm, and had to take a step back to rejoin her.

"What?" he asked.

"I turned them down."

"Why?" he asked.

She looked at his face, broad and familiar, and wondered how she had ever found it attractive.

"I told you," she said. "It isn't the methodology. There's something wrong with the way that we conduct the research itself. Our assumptions are flawed. We're playing with something so dangerous that it could destroy all of us if we're not careful."

"You're being melodramatic," he said, and her breath caught.

He was supposed to be the one who believed her. He was supposed to be the one who understood. He had been with her from the beginning. He knew she had changed the direction of the research and when she had done that, the deaths had started.

Or, as the committee had said, the disappearances. *No one knows if they're dead, Quintana*, one of the generals said to her. *You have simply made that assumption.*

They're dead to us, sir, Rosealma said. *We'll never get them back.*

"No," she said. "I'm not being 'melodramatic.' If we continue this research, many more good people will die. And that's something we could stop."

"The research is important, Rose. This technology will help all of the ships in the Empire."

He was giving her the company line, and that made her even more tired.

"No, it won't," she said. "It won't help any ship except military vessels. If we ever get the stealth tech to work, it'll just make the Empire stronger. It won't do any good at all."

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He was frowning at her, as if he didn't understand her.

"Quint, this technology, it's not worth all the lives. People shouldn't have to die because we're trying to recreate an old weapons system."

He studied her for a long moment. Then he said, "People die, Rose. They die for thousands of reasons, some good, some bad, some utterly stupid. They die in accidents and they die too young and they die because they went the wrong way or chose the wrong path. People die."

She was shaking. "Not because of something I developed."

"You didn't develop stealth tech," he said.

"I thought I understood it. I don't. And they're dying because of that. And those assholes in that room won't stop the research. They won't let us rethink our entire strategy. They say we've had too many breakthroughs."

"We've had more breakthroughs because of you than we ever had before," Quint said.

She was staring at him and wondering when he became a stranger. What was he arguing? That she continue?

"The breakthroughs come at too high a cost," she said.

"You lose some lives to save others," he said.

"Stealth tech won't save lives!" Her raised voice shocked her. She had never yelled at Quint before. She cleared her throat. "Stealth tech, if it works, will cost lives. The Empire will use it to move into the Nine Planets Alliance."

"You don't know that," Quint said, but as he spoke, he looked away. *He* knew it. He knew she was right, and he wasn't willing to say that to her.

"It doesn't matter," she said, walking around him. "They didn't listen to me."

"So you do what I said." He kept pace with her. "Take the job. You change the experiment from within."

"Even if I had the stomach for it—which I don't," she said, "I can't do it now."

"Why?" he asked.

"I resigned my commission, Quint. I'm done with all of this."

He grabbed her arm so hard that it hurt. "Don't do that, Rose. Go back in there. Tell them you made a mistake."

"I didn't make a mistake, Quint," she said. "I did what I had to do."

He grabbed her other arm and pulled her toward him. He brought his face close to hers. "You can't do this, Rose. You're our best mind. You're the secret to stealth tech. You can't leave."

"I already have, Quint." She tried to keep her voice calm, even though he was hurting her.

"Those people, they don't matter," he said. "They're expendable. You're not."

"What people?" she asked. "The ones who died? Or their loved ones who want to believe their dead relatives will come back?"

"All of them," he said. "You can't care about them. Your work is too important."

"Do you care about them?" she asked.

"Hell, no," he said. "Why should I?"

She wrenched out of his grasp. Her upper arms ached where his hands had dug in. She lowered her head and walked away.

"Rose, wait."

She didn't. She kept walking. He grabbed her one more time, and she tried to yank away, but he held her too tight.

"Why should I care about them?" he asked.

"Because science is supposed to be for the public good, Quint," she said. "Not to help the Empire gain more power."

"There's nothing wrong with the Empire, Rose." He sounded convinced.

She looked down at his hand. "Let me go, Quint. You're hurting me."

He released her. She shook her arm, trying to get the circulation back.

"And, for the record, Quint," she said. "Any time a government believes that it can sacrifice people for the greater good, then there's something wrong with that government."

He frowned as if he was trying to understand. The look on his face hurt her more than anything. He hadn't understood. He hadn't understood from the beginning. And she should have realized it.

She turned her back on him and walked away.

And she hoped she would never ever see him again.

Now

"**W**hat happened to me," she repeated. If she explained it to him, she would simply see that expression again, the one she had walked away from so long ago.

So she decided to sidestep the question.

"What happened to me is simple," she said. "I grew up."

He was frowning. She couldn't trust him. Not even when he said he could keep her from the worst punishments. Maybe he could. But he wouldn't save her from interrogations. And the last thing she wanted to do was betray her friends.

She didn't dare trust him. He always tricked her.

And then she got cold. He was tricking her now, forcing her into conversation while the military closed in on her ship. She wasn't leaving the area—

Because of him.

She had to get away from him. Or at least, she had to try.

"What does that mean, grew up?" he asked.

"It means it's been a long time since I last saw you, Quint," she said. "What happened to me is too complicated to explain in an hour-long conversation. I lived a lot. So did you."

His frown eased as the tension in his body seemed to go. Maybe she did know him. And maybe she had grown up enough to fool him.

"Oh, dear," she said, keeping her voice calm. "You're bleeding again."

He raised a hand toward his face.

"Don't touch it," she said. "I don't know what got in those wounds. But something's keeping them from healing. I don't want you to spread it. Sit back on the bed."

He looked alarmed. He sat down.

She grabbed her kit and brought it over. Then she picked up the numbing agent. "Lean back. Close your eyes for just a minute."

He did. She grabbed one of the anesthetics, hoped the dosage wouldn't be too much for him, and as she wiped the numbing agent along his clean cheek, she inserted the anesthetic into his neck.

"Hey!" he said, and tried to sit up. But she held him down with one hand, knowing the anesthetic would work quickly.

He fumbled, reached, and fell backward.

"Hey," he repeated softly. And then he closed his eyes.

She stepped back, counting for a full minute. No one, no matter how strong they were, could stay awake with that stuff flowing through them. She checked his vital signs. They were good.

She hadn't really thought this through. But she had only a few minutes to execute the plan, however haphazard it was.

Her heart was beating harder than his was. She hurried to one of the escape pods, and checked the supplies. Food and water for a week, more if he rationed. Her hand

floated over the communications equipment. If she took it out of the pod, she would buy more time. He couldn't contact anyone. She could leave the emergency beacon.

But he might die before anyone found him.

Then she shook her head. One person too many had already died on this mission. She wasn't going to kill Quint, too.

She left the pod's door open. Then she went to the bed. It had been a long time since she'd lifted someone heavier than she was. She eyeballed him. She thought she could do it without reducing the gravity in the ship.

She slid under him and pulled him over her shoulder, wobbling a bit under his weight. She lurched like a drunk as she carried him to the pod, glad that the ship was relatively empty, so she didn't hit much. She crouched, her knees screaming in protest, then let him fall to the floor.

He didn't wake up.

She shoved him into the pod, checked his vitals one last time, and let out a small sigh of relief. He was fine. He would be fine.

Weirdly, she felt the urge to apologize. She was leaving him yet again without any explanation—or, at least, without an explanation he could understand.

But she didn't say anything. Instead, she closed the pod door and went to *The Dane's* control panel. She noted the coordinates, made sure the pod's emergency beacon showed on her communications readout, and then set the pod loose.

"Get out, get out, get out," she whispered. She never wanted to see him again, and she was afraid she would.

She looked at the screens, watched as the pod tumbled away from *The Dane*. She needed to get out of this sector. This cruiser couldn't escape Enterran space fast enough to get her to the Nine Planets before Quint was found. Plus she had believed him when he said that he had already released information about the ship.

Everyone would be looking for her.

For that reason alone, she couldn't go back to the rendezvous, nor could she contact the others. She hoped they would follow instructions and leave after the designated period of time.

Not that anyone would be looking for them. As far as the Empire knew, as far as Quint knew, she had been working alone.

The pod got smaller and smaller until it was just a dot on her screen. She should just leave him to his fate. After all, one death in the service of a cause didn't matter. That was his philosophy, anyway.

But it wasn't hers.

She went to the control panel, scanned for the nearest starbase, and sent a coded message, warning of a ship in trouble, and escape pods at these coordinates.

It was the least she could do to salve her own conscience, even though doing so might cause her capture.

She had no idea if she would get out of this alive, but she was going to try. And she was going to try to do it alone.

But she kept staring at that dot, even as it became part of the blackness of space, indistinguishable from everything around it.

He had known her well. He had probably known what she would do.

He had made it easy for her to get into the Empire, to get back on a stealth tech research team. He had done it for the wrong reason, but he had done it.

Had he let her go this time?

She closed her eyes for just a moment. He had called her his Achilles' heel. Maybe she was. And maybe she should be grateful.

But she'd rather believe that she had escaped him a second time.

She'd rather believe she had done it on her own. ○

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THE CULT OF WHALE WORSHIP

Dominica Phetteplace

The problem with handling diseased animals is that you might catch what they have. Since the rats were infected with the suicide bug three months ago, Tetsuo was sure he had traded his brain for a ticking time bomb. In addition to severe headaches, he found himself lingering a little too long on bridges and tall balconies.

This is not because my love for you is unrequited, the first draft of his departing note read, *This is for the whales*.

It was addressed to Aoi, a fellow researcher at the lab. She understood about whales. Her brother was the one who had poisoned the whale meat at the Tsukiji market. Kaito had decided that the problem of whaling could only be solved by rational self-interest. He wasn't a trained scientist, like Tetsuo, nor did he have Tetsuo's access to sophisticated superbugs. Instead, he burgled a dermatologist's office and infected the dead whale meat with Botox.

Kaito wanted people to believe that the whales themselves had become diseased, their tasty flesh turned to poison. But laboratory tests easily identified the neurotoxin, thus exposing the act of terrorism for what it was and nothing more. Thirteen people were sickened.

He had escaped to Australia without becoming a suspect because Japanese authorities were convinced that the act was committed by a Westerner, perhaps one of the many tourists who visit the market.

Aoi had only seen Kaito twice in the five years since he left. They used to be very close. Together they would hand out pamphlets at restaurants that served whale sashimi. Most people that passed on the street would refuse the pamphlets and refuse eye contact. Inevitably, the police would come by and ask the siblings to please stop disturbing the peace, please.

Aoi didn't love Tetsuo, but that didn't mean they couldn't be friends. She knew she could trust him. She once confessed a wish to improve upon Kaito's plans, which Tetsuo listened to very carefully in case he might be able to grant it. She wanted to design a parasite that could live commensally within a whale, but was toxic to humans. A tall order, but if you could be successful, you could fabricate a

similar one that would poison shark fins and rhinoceros horns. You could save the tigers.

Tetsuo thought about Aoi's dream parasite as he ate dinner one night. He was at Junsaya, eating raw chicken skewers. Salmonella wasn't a concern, but even if it was, he would just start eating his chicken cooked. So it would go with any designer parasite or virus you could put into a live whale. There might be an easy way to disinfect it for human consumption, your triumph of science and possible dissertation denatured merely by changing the preparation method.

That wasn't the only problem. The idea of infecting whales with something, even something benign, bothered him. Was it even ethical?

Think of it as a vaccine for whales, he told himself.

No, it's humans that are diseased. And we are the ones that need to be inoculated, he thought again. And not even all of us, just the ones who think it's okay to eat endangered species. They are impure, there are only two cures: cleansing or mind control.

Tetsuo knew more about the second than the first on account of the fact that he was working in a lab that was researching the mind-altering parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, variant III. It was a subspecies of *T. gondii* that the lab was in the process of reverse engineering. They were making rats sick to one day make humans well.

The parasite could cause suicide, dementia, and schizophrenia in all mammals, but variant III in particular was associated with increased feelings of religious devotion. It wasn't designed that way, but that's how it ended up.

T. gondii needed a predator-prey partnership to complete its life cycle, most commonly cats and rats. The bradyzoites would cause lesions in the rat's amygdala that made it sexually attracted to cat urine, something that a rat is normally frightened of. That made the rat more likely to be eaten by a cat, which would transfer *T. gondii* to the cat's stomach and enable the protozoan to finish its life cycle. Post-digestion, *T. gondii* would be excreted by the cat and would infect any mammal that came in physical contact with the contaminated cat feces.

In the paper *Impact of Secreted Protein K+a on T. gondii v.III Reproduction*, the authors locked infected rats into cages with cats. Mostly the rats got eaten, but there were some cats who didn't understand the rats as food. These cats were advanced to the next stage of the experiment, where they lived with the rats in richer and more complex environments. The rats would congregate around the cat urine, so the researchers became prompt about changing the cat's box. In the absence of easy access to the compound in the urine that was elevating the level of dopamine in the rat's infected brains, the rats began to exhibit what was observed to be worshipful behavior.

Tetsuo decided to replicate the experiment in his own apartment, just so he could be sure. He brought a cat home from the pet shop to interact with the rats. When it killed and ate two of the experimental subjects, he euthanized it. He did this twice more until he found Yojimbo, a pudgy and gentle orange tabby. Yojimbo ignored the rats, showing no interest either in prey-killing or friend-making.

Yojimbo's aloofness was steadfast, despite the fact that the rats would huddle to be near him, piling on top of him like possum babies. The rats would take breaks from cuddling only for vital functions (though one rat did starve from forgetting to eat). The rats would eat quickly, drink quickly, pee quickly and then return to Yojimbo with a mouth full of unchewed food, to be deposited in the offering pile in front of him.

Yojimbo always reacted the same to this, lifting his nostrils in interest, then squinting his eyes in disgust. He never touched his offering pile. Sometimes he would shift, under the bulk of a dozen rats (which kept him warm, he did like that), so that he wouldn't have to face the pile of slobbered-on rat food, but that would mean a new pile would form right in front of him.

The engineered *T. gondii* variant III that the lab rats were infected with was evolved to be less deadly than the usual one, which made it easier to treat, but more pernicious in another way. A deadly parasite would kill the host and the brain it was meant to control. A less deadly parasite would let the host live, so it could spread to many more individuals. Tetsuo was engineering an even gentler strain for the rats at home that would infect the brain without eating away at it too much. He wondered if cat pheromones would trigger a similar reaction in infected humans as in infected rats. Tetsuo didn't feel worshipful towards Yojimbo, though he was grateful to the cat for helping his work proceed. He liked the way the cat would purr when he heard the can opener, and soon Tetsuo was feeding his pet six or seven cans of gravy a day.

Tetsuo emerged from his apartment only for work and to buy cat food. Tonight was different, however. He was going to have dinner with Aoi and Kaito, who had just yesterday returned from a stint at Sea Shepherd, as a crew member aboard a whale protection ship.

They were going to have chicken sukiyaki at Botan. Beef-free sukiyaki was hard to come by, but Kaito's almost-vegetarianism was formed along a hierarchy of intelligence that permitted chicken but not cows. Dumb fish like salmon fell on the edible side of the dividing line, but the collapse of global fish stocks and looming onset of the desert ocean made seafood unpalatable. To eat fish right now was to steal from sharks and swordfish.

It was a long walk to the restaurant from Tetsuo's apartment, but he thought it best to avoid the train, for fear he might suddenly decide to throw himself on the tracks. Of course he might also throw himself into traffic as he walked, but that was less of a sure thing. The cars might stop, or you might survive but incur painful and debilitating injuries. The uncertainty and banality made it an unattractive way to go.

As he crossed a bridge that spanned the Kanda River, he stopped to stare down into the water. It was eleven days ago that he had seen a killer whale in this river.

It glistened in the moonlight and radiated wisdom. It raised its head out of the water and stared at Tetsuo with knowing eyes. Then it winked and departed before Tetsuo had the chance to wink back. At that moment all Tetsuo wanted was to jump in and be devoured alive by the whale. He could imagine each sensation, the free fall followed by the splash of cold water followed by the snapping of his bones and the warmth of the whale's stomach. This is how he wanted to die, he was sure of it. It was only his work that kept him alive.

It wasn't until later that he realized he could not die this way, not ever, because he might infect the orca with his disease. The realization that he could not depart in this most perfect manner made him weep.

DO NOT FEED MY BODY TO THE WHALES. DO NOT SCATTER MY ASHES, he wrote in his parting note.

He had visited the bridge every day since the sighting. He enjoyed temptation, a function of his enormous willpower, he supposed. Tonight, he stared down at the darkness for a full ten minutes, drying out his eyes. Did he even blink? He did not know. But he did not see a whale. Impossible things do not happen twice.

Kaito made his announcement during dinner.

"I wish to strike again," he whispered.

Tetsuo shook his head. He did not want Kaito to repeat his crime and its tragic outcome. *There is a better way*, he wanted to say. *You don't have to kill your enemies, you just have to change their minds.*

"Can't you help us?" asked Aoi.

"Yes. I am working on it. You will know soon," said Tetsuo. He was making a synthetic and extra-powerful cat pheromone for Aoi to wear. It would inspire devotion,

but of an unknown kind. Would the new converts be like zombies? Would they try to eat her brain?

On the way back from the restaurant, Tetsuo abandoned self-control. He jumped from the bridge, determined to find the whale.

He landed in the water twenty feet below, and sprained his ankle when his feet hit the concrete bottom of the river. It was much too shallow to support a fully grown orca. Maybe he had seen a baby. Maybe it was separated from its mother and needed his help.

He stayed in as long as possible, waiting for the baby whale. He had named her Kayoko, sensing intuitively that it was a she. He had to be fished out because he wouldn't leave the water on his own.

He showed up for work the next morning a little later than usual due to his bum ankle. Dr. Sato summoned him for a meeting right away, uttering those deadly words, "We need to talk."

"You have been acting strange lately," said Sato, and Tetsuo nodded in agreement as he braced himself for the worst.

"You have recently become a disappointment to me," Sato continued. "I have not seen you in the evenings lately, nor on the weekends. Your work-ethic leaves much to be desired."

Tetsuo squirmed against the maniacal laugh that was struggling to escape from his intestines. He fought it by blinking his eyes hard.

"And then there is the matter of your suicide attempt."

Tetsuo didn't feel like arguing the point right then. He didn't feel like saying: *Actually, no, I just wanted to say hi to the baby whale that lives in the river, and while I am going to kill myself soon, very soon, that was not it.*

He was given a warning and a mental-health leave from work. That gave him time to finish his at-home research or come as close to finishing as he could. He doubted his results, but he was meticulous in the execution of his plan, regardless.

His dead body would be a bio-hazard, and he needed to be responsible in containing it so as not to afflict the innocent. This would be a most ethical plague.

He wanted to dissolve in a streak of violence. He wanted a high-impact death, to be done in by momentum. But such things were messy, so instead he prepared a cyanide capsule.

Those hardworking mitochondria. How diligently they produced ATP by forcing protons across membranes. The cyanide would disrupt the membranes by poking holes in them, making ATP synthesis impossible. The body would starve without this fuel, but it would be a very quick starvation, about thirty seconds or so. Tetsuo pitied his organelles, but not his organs, strangely enough.

The suicide pill made him feel like a spy. He stared at it and hoped that death would feel like something. He picked a day in his calendar and circled it in red.

It had to be Aoi that would discover the corpse. The cult had only three members, soon to be two, and Kaito was the less qualified sibling for this particular job. Years of killing rats had hardened Aoi to gruesomeness.

Tetsuo had commissioned a local jeweler to make something special for Aoi. It was a pendant in the shape of a whale tail, in blackened silver with white sapphires. The stones were placed in such a way as to replicate the markings of a humpback whale. The markings of each humpback tail were unique, and so could be used to track the whales. Tetsuo carefully pored over the photos in the whale tail registry before deciding on Joie, female, age 32 (estimated), known mother of at least four other whales in the registry, last seen in the spring off the coast of Baja California. Joie's markings were the prettiest; they reminded Tetsuo of sheet music.

The pendant was hollow on the inside, to accommodate a vial of cat pheromones, synthetic because Tetsuo had killed enough cats already. He had already prepared several vials of pheromones and several more of *T. gondii* variant IV, along with instructions on how to make more. Aoi would be in charge of the lab work, while it would fall to Kaito to poison whale meat at various fish markets and restaurants. Both of them would leaflet restaurants together, in the hope that her scent would attract the afflicted.

"Join us," she would say.

Yes, they would nod, not even fully sure of what they were agreeing to.

On the day marked in red, Tetsuo changed his plans. He would poison the meat himself. As long as he had a cyanide pill in his pocket, he might as well cause a little mischief.

At the market, the whale flesh was cut into rectangles and placed on ice. Pink and white and red, bloody, but not bleeding. Tetsuo did not gag as he stared at it. The small plastic sign named the price, 3000 yen a pound. He adjusted the sign and a thin stream of liquid microbes fell from a vial taped to his wrist onto meat for sale. The act went unnoticed. He would survive the day and return tomorrow. Today was not the day in red. The day in red would be the day he got caught.

He would pop that pill before being placed in handcuffs. So long, suckers! He wouldn't know if he had done more harm than good in this lifetime until he reached the next. He feared returning to earth as a lab rat, though there would be a certain justice to that. The goal was to reincarnate as a whale. Minke or fin or blue or killer. Happy and free and safe from the Institute of Cetacean "Research." Worshipped by all, but especially Aoi. ○

BEING ONE WITH YOUR BROOM

First you have to decide
If your broom
Is aerodynamic
Flying shaftlong up
With the bunch of twigs of broomstraw
Balancing the flight behind

Or if your broom
Is sprouting into animal sense
And needs its twigs
Facelike
Forward
To see your heading

Also you could do with stirrups
And a bit of saddle
Leastwise
If your destination's
More than a minute's
Distance

—Ruth Berman



THIS PETTY PACE

Jason K. Chapman

Jason K. Chapman tells us, "I work as the IT Director for Poets & Writers (pw.org) which, all things considered, is the exact spot in the universe I should be in. I get to indulge my two greatest interests, computers and literature, and get paid for it." Jason's love of SF began when he stumbled across a copy of *The Hugo Winners*, Volumes I & II in his early teens. The author's short fiction appearances include stories in the *Grantville Gazette-Universe Annex* and *Clarkesworld*. Readers can find out more about him at jasonkchapman.com. Jason's riveting tale about a desperate attempt to outwit fate is his first story for *Asimov's*.

Kyle Preston was already out of time when the stranger appeared in the middle of his coffee table. There was a flash and a pop and suddenly the image was there, stopping Kyle with one hand clutching his keys and the other reaching for the doorknob of his Upper West Side apartment. The image was clear, but thin, like a projection on a fog bank. The man looked frightened.

"Look, forget what I said before," the image said. The voice, too, was thin, like a bad dub heard through cheap earphones. "The records are all jumbled. There are *two* of them."

"What the hell?" Kyle walked toward the image, moving around the side of his found-on-the-sidewalk sofa. From every angle, the image still faced him. The coffee table sliced through the stranger's legs just below the knees. His feet were lost in the stacks of reference books and scientific journals Kyle stored below the table.

"The Bureau knows I'm here," the image went on, "so my time is almost up." He laughed, then, in a manic, edge-of-panic sort of way. "I think I was wrong. Whatever you do, don't go to Paris!" The image vanished.

Kyle stared at the empty space above the coffee table for a moment, but it stayed empty. He looked at the battered old wind-up watch that clung to his wrist by its cracked leather band. He had a cell phone. He had a cable box. He owned a laptop. At any given time, Kyle was never far away from a network-synchronized, mutually accepted, atomically sound time keeper, but still he hung on to the crappy watch that crept ahead five minutes every three days simply because of the scratches on the back of its case. "Sorry I couldn't do more," it read. It was a fitting epitaph for the old man. Pity he'd misspelled the word *didn't*.

The absurdities were piled thick upon deep, not the least of which being the idea that a Columbia grad student working his way toward a career in theoretical physics could afford to go to Paris. The stranger had acted as if this had happened before. If

so, Kyle must have missed it. Just how in the hell do you project an image onto nothing, anyway? Especially with no projector. Kyle waved his hand above the coffee table, assuring himself of the thinness of the air. Sure, there was that paper by Krakowski about squeezing photons into one of the micro dimensions, but there was no way to determine where they'd reappear. Was there?

He was already reaching for his sub-table archive when he remembered his lunch date with Anna. *Crap!* Time had gotten away from him again. And she'd been so insistent. They *had* to have lunch today. No, it *couldn't* wait till tonight. She *really* needed to see him. Her emphasis had buzzed through the cheap speaker of his free-when-you-sign-your-soul-away cell phone. Fine. He'd blow the budget and take a cab down to Union Square. A week of ramen noodles would balance things out.

When the cab dropped him on 15th Street, Kyle waded into the crowd. The place was a madhouse, as always, but it was Kyle's kind of madhouse. Thousands of people bounced around in a Brownian chaos that made the city hum. Cell phone in hand, he played a quick game of microwave Marco Polo with Anna. He finally spotted her at the southeast corner of the square. She wore that maroon sweater dress that made Kyle's knees go loose every single time. Again, he swore to himself never to ask what she saw in him. She might realize she didn't have an answer.

"I can't believe you took a cab," Anna said.

He put an arm around her and aimed for the crosswalk. Across the streets that bounded it, Union Square was surrounded by stores and restaurants. "If I hadn't," he said, "I'd still be twenty minutes away."

The light changed and they moved with the mass of pedestrians waiting at the corner. "Cool," she said. "It's like time travel."

He coughed deliberately. "I thought we'd agreed that *I'd* do the physics around here."

She shrugged, laughing. "It's like Schrodinger's Subway Rider. He's both here and twenty minutes away at the same time and you don't know which until he meets his girlfriend."

"That's it, young lady. No more quantum mechanics before bedtime."

"Meanie."

"And furthermore—"

"Stop."

"Why?"

"We're here."

Kyle found himself standing outside a tiny eatery. Three tables, all full, poked out of the restaurant's open front onto the sidewalk. At a glance, there wasn't much to distinguish it from a thousand other places in the city. Kyle glanced up at the awning. It read "Paris Café."

"Kyle, what's wrong?"

Don't go to Paris. He was being silly. Wasn't he? He'd almost convinced himself that he'd imagined the whole episode, but now wasn't so sure. "I don't know," he said. "It just . . ."

"Barbara recommended it. Sort of a Parisian-Masala blend with locally-grown organics. She says it's great. Well, you know Barb. She actually said it's 'sooper awesome.'"

"It's full," Kyle said.

"Look. There's an open two-top in the back."

"I just don't like it."

"You've been here?"

"No," Kyle said. "Just call it a feeling."

She sighed. "Way to go, Mr. Analytical."

They ended up at the restaurant next door. It was equally nondescript, but it had

an outdoor table open which made it, as Barb would say, *sooper awesome*. Kyle never did get to find out if the food was any good. The gas line inside the Paris Café exploded before they'd even placed their order.

Kyle didn't believe in hell, but he did believe in force and mass and acceleration. He believed in the deformation of physical structures upon the application of force vectors. He also believed he could have saved Anna's life. If he'd insisted on moving just one more restaurant down the row, just a few yards farther away, the brick that blew out of the café's façade would have flown out into the street, instead of intersecting with Anna's skull.

And wouldn't that have been just *sooper awesome*.

Except for the funeral, Kyle barely left his apartment for three weeks. There'd been two wreaths at the service, two weights around Kyle's neck, two holes in his universe. Anna's mother told him why Anna had been so excited that day, why she'd insisted on the lunch date. She'd planned to tell him about the pregnancy.

He thought about following his father down that bloody, barefoot path of broken booze bottles, where every cut slashed at those around you, draining their lives away as fast as your own, while you staggered on, blissfully unaware of the damage you did. It was the "blissfully unaware" part that he found so appealing. As to the rest, who would care? *Sorry I couldn't do more*. And that was the rub, wasn't it? The anger that had fueled Kyle's life, the certainty that his father had been wrong, would evaporate, leaving Kyle momentumless, massless, inert. It would, in a way, justify the old man. And Kyle just couldn't let that happen.

When the stranger appeared again, Kyle barely reacted. Nothing seemed to matter that much, not even the question of "how?" Maybe, if he was really, really lucky, he was losing his mind, and some kindly gorillas in shiny white coats would be along any minute with a welcome dose of mind-numbing drugs to take it all away. Forget the fuel. Forget the engine. Let the tide push him where it would.

"My name is Gadwin Smith," the image said, its feet planted, once again, in Kyle's coffee table. This time, though, it was buried up to its knees in take-out detritus and half-empty soda cans. The stranger looked down at nothing and his hands worked the air in front of him. "I'm not sure I have this thing calibrated right. I hope so. I can't tell you how I'm doing this, really. Even if I thought it was a good idea."

"I don't care," Kyle said. He slouched farther down on the couch, bumping the table with his knee. An avalanche spilled yesterday's young chow onto the floor. "Just bring on the drugs."

"I can't explain how I know," Gadwin Smith went on, "but you'll figure it out, eventually. Tomorrow, you're going to have lunch with Anna."

"Bastard!" Kyle kicked over the table, spreading garbage everywhere and leaving Gadwin standing in a pile of books and journals.

Oblivious to Kyle's outburst, the image went on. "When you do, make sure you go to the Paris Café. It's very important."

Kyle slid off the sofa, his knee toppling the stack of journals. He buried his face in his hands and, while he didn't believe in heaven any more than he believed in hell, he begged the universe to send the white-coated saviors and their pretty, pretty drugs to take his mind away to a place of weightless wonder.

No one ever came for Kyle Preston's mind. Instead, he found a way to make peace with it. In the ten years since Anna's death, he'd accomplished a great deal. Once he'd found a way through the fog, he'd finished his masters and his PhD and landed a research position at Columbia.

He'd made his mark by giving an old idea new vigor, never pausing long enough to

examine the force that pushed him in that direction. He refused to admit to himself why he was fixated on his chosen line of research. Eventually, he forgot there was anything to hide. Now, if his preliminary data held up, he'd finally succeeded.

To be accurate, Kyle hadn't really forced a photon out of this universe and back in. It was the *information* about the photon that moved. But the end result was the same. The light struck the target before it left the source.

Kyle's other big accomplishment was more personal. Her name was Cathy Evans. They'd met a year before. He'd been thoroughly unprepared for the encounter, and by the time he'd tried to talk himself out of it, he'd found himself on his first date since Anna. It wasn't nearly as difficult as he'd feared it would be. He wasn't sure he was ready to capitalize the "L" in *love* yet, but the universe seemed to work a little better when she was around.

Cathy was a freelance Web developer with a Hell's Kitchen loft that most New Yorkers would seriously consider selling a close relative for. Lately, they'd spent more time at her place than his and more than once the conversation had danced around making the arrangement permanent. After all, the subway commute up to Columbia wasn't *that* bad and her living room area *was* the size of a basketball half-court. And then there was that whole "universe worked better" thing.

For the third time that month, he'd just about convinced himself to move in as he unlocked the door after the ride from work. He took a breath to announce the decision when he noticed Cathy had company.

"Hey, hon," Cathy said. She jumped off the couch and came toward him, trailed by a tall, thin woman whose urban hipster outfit was just outdated enough to be cutting-edge retro. "This is Mimi. She's the one I've been telling you about. We've been friends since shortly before dirt was invented."

Mimi stopped a few feet away and gave him a long, exaggerated inspection. "So you're the big geek that's captured my little geek's heart, huh?"

Kyle smiled at her. "I prefer über-geek, actually."

"Oh." She feigned a look of sympathy. "Size issues?"

Cathy kind of squeaked. "Mimi!"

Kyle knew his face was a bright, embarrassed red, but he struggled to keep his expression flat. "As far as I can tell," he said, "my lab is perfectly adequate for the work I'm doing." He smiled, feeling the corners of his mouth quiver.

Mimi held him in a wide-eyed stare for a second, before exploding into laughter. She laughed with a passion that sucked in all of those around her. "God," she said. "You're perfect. I gotta run, Ace. Dinner. Soon. Promise." She quick-pecked Cathy's cheek and hurried toward the door, pausing to give Kyle a quick little bow. "Nice to meet you, Your Geekness."

She was gone before Kyle could respond. "Wow," he said to the empty air.

"Yeah," Cathy said. "She can be exhausting."

Kyle kissed her hello. "I never thought of you as an 'Ace,'" he said.

"Want a beer?" Cathy went around the breakfast bar to the open kitchen that anchored the loft's center. She pulled two bottles of beer out of the refrigerator and shoved the door closed with her knee. "She's called me that since we were kids."

She opened the bottles and he took one of them from her, heading for the living room area. "I assume there's a good story behind it," he said.

"Just my initials."

"Your what?"

"A-C-E," she said. "Anna Catherine Evans."

Kyle dropped onto the sofa with a loud thud.

"Hey! Careful with the furniture," Cathy said. "That thing is like twelve years old. We should probably get a new one. Well, *I* should, anyway. Unless . . . Something wrong?"

There are two of them.

"No," Kyle said. "Just bad timing. It's hard to calculate when you'll hit the target, isn't it? Even if you know where it is."

"Sitting down is new to you, then?"

"What?"

She eased down next to him, curling her feet up beside her and leaning against his side. "Are you sure you're okay?"

A darkness loomed at the edge of his mind, one that brought with it tears, and fears, and fervent pleas for someone to bring on oblivion. He swallowed those thoughts, nearly choking, and chased them with a long pull on the beer in his hand. He stared at the bottle. Moisture ran down its side, leaving trails on the brown glass. Oblivion in a bottle. "I don't think I want this," he said, but in truth he wanted more. And more. Until the trails blurred and the bottles crashed and the world just went away. Until there was nothing left but a vague idea that he could have done more.

But Cathy took him at his word. She took the bottle from him and set it on the floor. She said she had some juice, but he didn't want that either, so she hugged him and told him something funny that Mimi had said earlier, and that led to something else, and before Kyle knew it, the universe was working better again. For a while.

He didn't sleep well that night. The darkness had merely receded, roiling just at the edge of perception. He woke to Gadwin Smith's voice. Kyle found the image in the kitchen, buried waist deep in the breakfast bar. How had he found Kyle here? And after all these years?

"I waited a couple of minutes," Gadwin said, "but nothing's changed. Maybe I missed you. Or maybe nothing will change. They talk about alternate time lines and multiple universes. I don't know. Maybe nothing changes. Anna died. Anna lived. The records make no sense. That must mean *something*."

Kyle leaned against the kitchen counter, feeling sick.

Unaware of the agony he caused, Gadwin went on. "The Loyalty Bureau doesn't trust me. I don't have much time. Listen. I don't know how, but you have to do something. There are things going on, things that started even then—now. People are dying by the millions. He's got weapons in orbit—Skelbak weapons. The aliens don't care what he does as long as they get what they want. You have to change things. Stop him before he starts. My brother can't be allowed—" Gadwin broke off, looking over his shoulder, then vanished.

On some level, Kyle had known it all along. Isn't that why he'd begun his own line of research? Messages from the future. Gadwin had found him here because he was supposed to be here, was already here, in some sense. He'd moved in and left a record of the address in some database somewhere that survived for Gadwin to find.

But the multiverse—the quantiverse? Yes, he liked that better—the quantiverse left room for error. If one theory held, every possibility happened in every way possible, no matter what one individual did. In that case, poor Gadwin was doomed to live through his brother's reign of terror and nothing Kyle did would change that. The important thing was that Kyle was right where he was supposed to be.

"Couldn't sleep?" Cathy drifted into the kitchen wearing a Pink Floyd T-shirt that barely reached the top of her thighs. She gave him a sleepy smile and pressed herself against his side.

"Just thinking," Kyle said, putting his arms around her.

She mumbled against his chest. "Three in the morning is a horrible time for theoretical physics," she said. "Don't quarks need sleep?"

"No, something else."

"Hmmm?"

He pulled her close, relishing the feel of her. "I think I should move in."

"Can't," she said.

"But I thought . . ."

"Movers are closed." She looked up at him, smiling. "You'll have to wait till morning."

It was five years before Gadwin reappeared. Kyle was hurrying to get to the hospital, where Cathy was already in labor with their first child, when the image popped into the space between Kyle and the loft's front door. Kyle dropped the tote bag he'd been loading up with last minute necessities. Reds and yellows spilled onto the floor. They'd forgone the traditional pink and blue, preferring not to know the baby's sex until it was born. He gathered up the loose items while Gadwin launched into a replay of the message from five years before.

"I don't care!" Kyle yelled. "I can't help you. I have my own life to worry about."

"I tried your father," Gadwin said, "but your background isn't very clear. I don't think you two were close."

Kyle checked his watch. It read 3:27. Minus five minutes. Time enough for the darkness to pile deeper, for the uncertainties to coil around his throat, for regrets to flow, leaving damp trails on his blood-drained cheeks. Not quite time enough, though, to forgive the past for not doing more.

"If I have time, I'll try your son," Gadwin said. "After that, things get muddled by the war. The lineage is there, but no places or times."

My son. It's a boy. For chrissake just tell me everything, why don't you?

Someone banged on the door, but it was Gadwin who looked around. Someone, sometime in the dim, dark future, was going to bang on Gadwin's door. Kyle wished they'd just arrest him already, get him out of Kyle's life, out of his son's life. *Sorry, Gadwin, but fuck off and leave me alone.* It wasn't his time. It wasn't his life. It just wasn't his problem.

Kyle fingered the tiny pistol's barrel as he sat alone on the bed. Bright Long Island sun streamed in through the windows, glinting off the weapon's sleek side where it rested on his lap. The metal was smooth and polished and so unlike the wrinkled flesh that touched it. He was sixty years old. Sixty! Time had gotten away from him. It always seemed to do that. It was slippery that way. Had it really been twenty-five years since he and Cathy had moved out of the city?

Gadwin hadn't been back, but he didn't need to this time, did he? *Gadwin, you bastard.* There was so much he hadn't mentioned. He'd never mentioned the Nobel Prize, never mentioned the book deals, never mentioned the money. At the very least, he could have warned Kyle about the short-lived disaster that was Kyle's television show. As if you really *could* popularize theoretical physics in mass media. On second thought, maybe Kyle should have seen that one coming on his own.

But that was all done now. Kyle had had his fling with fame, leaving him with enough of the fortune to keep them comfortable for the rest of their lives. His son was grown and married and his daughter-in-law was just three months away from Kyle's grandson. Oh, yes, they'd chosen to know the sex right away. No surprises for his boy. Get the future over with. Bring it on.

It made sense in a way, didn't it? Out there in the living room, Cathy kept company with their son and his wife and the foreshadowing bulge in a dark, dangerous womb. That's why Kyle had to kill her. What else could he do? If only she'd kept her mouth shut. If only she'd broken with tradition, stepped away from the past, chosen a future of her own.

But she hadn't, had she? No, she just had to blurt it out about their son and the grand tradition her family had carried on for umpty-ump generations spanning two hundred years of mindless, spineless cowards who just did what their long-dead an-

cestors had told them to do. *Damn her!* He could still hear her sweet little bell-like voice tinkling along, explaining how in every generation, unbroken, her family's male children had been saddled with the weight of their ancestors. It didn't matter if it was the first, the middle, or stuck in a string of five, but every male child had one thing in common: the name Gadwin.

Kyle felt himself crashing against a stony shore, dragged by tides from the future and tossed by waves from the past. All along he'd been pushed this way and that, shoved along a course without any turns. He'd had no choices. There were no changes he could have made. It had all been predetermined. Well, that ended today.

He shoved the pistol into the pocket of the silly button-up sweater he wore because Cathy had given it to him. She'd seen Einstein wearing one like it in an old photograph and decided there was something "all dignified and emeritus-like" about it. It made her happy when he wore it. And the pistol fit nicely in the pocket.

Killing his daughter-in-law wouldn't make Cathy happy. Or his son. Or himself. "Kyle?" Cathy called from the living room.

"In a minute," he called back.

What else could he do? How else could he break the chain from Gadwin to Gadwin that led to that final Gadwin's brother and his evil alien weapons? Kyle checked his watch—that watch. He'd replaced the band a couple of times, and his mental adjustment was eight minutes, now, but the thing was still with him. *Sorry I couldn't do more.*

Sorry wasn't enough. You couldn't just regret things. You had to fix them. You *had* to do more. If you wanted to send a message, send a good one.

Yes, that was it. Kyle pulled the pistol out of his pocket and stuck it back into the nightstand. He didn't have to hurt anyone, didn't have to kill. He just had to send a message. His life's work had been about sending messages back in time. He'd been looking the wrong way. He needed to send a message to the future. He took the watch off his wrist for the last time and went to join his family in the living room.

In the following months, a great many people had cause to think that Kyle was losing his mind. As far as he was concerned, they may have been right, but he had enough notoriety—and enough money—that no one really cared. He chose the three most stable and prestigious law firms he could find and paid them staggering sums of money to contractually obligate them for at least two hundred years. As long as there were laws and courts and a country to keep them all enforced, those firms would keep his packages safe. They would watch over his descendants, tracking each generation of offspring. They would follow the trail of Gadwins no matter where it led, until one day Gadwin Smith would arrive.

The packages themselves weren't cheap, either. Paper alone wouldn't do. He etched his story into thin sheets of stainless steel. He had it encoded into every form he could think of and stored on every medium available. One of them had to make it through.

If you were going to send a message, make it a good one.

Kyle Preston checked his watch, subtracting the usual five minutes. He had plenty of time. It was still two hours before he had to meet Anna for lunch in Union Square. He was just about to sit down with a newly-arrived journal when the stranger appeared in the middle of his coffee table. There was a flash and a pop and there he was.

"My name is Gadwin Smith," the stranger began. "I don't understand how you knew about all this—this machine, my brother, the war." His eyes closed as his lips pressed themselves into a thin, pale line. He looked tortured. "Your message says that I told you about it—*will* tell you."

"What the hell?" Kyle walked toward the image, moving around the side of his found-on-the-sidewalk sofa. From every angle, the image still faced him. The coffee table sliced through the stranger's legs just below the knees.

"All these years I thought it was a joke," Gadwin Smith went on, "but I believe you now. And you have to believe me." The image held up two objects that appeared out of nowhere. One looked like a sheet of stiff, shiny paper. The other was a watch. "I can't stop him. No one can. Not now."

Kyle looked at his wrist and back at the image. It definitely looked like his watch. "Give me some time," Gadwin said. "I need to tell you a story."

"You want to tell me something," Kyle said. He took Anna's hand across the tiny café table, nearly knocking over the salt shaker.

"How do you know?"

"I just do." He barely flinched when he heard the explosion. They were at a place on 13th Street, nearly a block away from Union Square. He clutched Anna's hand as he felt his own begin to shake. It was New York. Loud noises were part of the scenery.

She looked past his shoulder. "What was that?"

"Not important," Kyle said. He smiled, shifting sideways to put himself in her line of sight. "You're what's important."

She smiled back at him. "Good," she said. She reached over with her other hand and touched his bare wrist. "Your father's watch?"

Kyle stared at the spot where Anna's fingers touched skin that had been kept too long away from the light and air. "His watch," he said. "Not mine. I can do better."

"Yes, you can," she said. "And you will." Then she told him her news.

By the time they heard the sirens in the distance they were too deeply wrapped in their life together to notice. Kyle smiled, took a deep breath, and cast himself into the unknown, uncertain future. ○

Extended Family

The bones of your mother
ride the unending dust storms
on Triad Sixteen.

Your father's skull
bleaches in the stark light
of an airless moon.

Your wife leaves you
for an alien lover
from the Haasedar Quadrant.

You daughter joins
a gravfree artist colony
in an artificial satellite.



Your teenage son
has never returned
from the Pleasure Domes.

You travel aimlessly
from red giant to white dwarf,
always on the look out for home.

—Bruce Boston

The Financial Times Weekend review of Kit Reed's new collection, *What Wolves Know*, calls the work a "confirmation of an extraordinary talent." The review sums Kit up neatly: "She calls herself 'transgenred,' acknowledging that her fiction is too fantastical for most literati and too literary for most fans of the fantastic." Her recent novels include *Enclave*, *The Baby Merchant* and *Thinner Than Thou*, and her short fiction appears in *Asimov's* as well as dozens of anthologies and periodicals that include *The Kenyon Review* and *The Yale Review*. She's been nominated for several awards in the SF field but in the realm of prizes, she's often been a bridesmaid, but, so far, not the bride. In a tale that is both literary and fantastic, Kit returns to our pages to reveal the terrors that lurk behind the icy smiles of authors vying for attention in a competition at a writers retreat and the horror that awaits the losers and those who can't cope with . . .

THE OUTSIDE EVENT

Kit Reed

I'm supposed to come down and sit in your, like, confession box and spill my . . . what? Wait! I have to do makeup. So, is this judged more on looks, or is it a performance thing?

All right, all right, this is *not* a contest, but. Really. Gazillion writing samples, audition demos, personal interviews and you only picked twenty of us, how is not competitive? I am very close to someone who didn't make it, and believe me, there are feelings . . . Davy, I love you, think of me as doing it for you!

Hello out there, audience? Judges? Whatever you are. This is Cynthia LaMott, speaking to you from The Confessional in the re-purposed Gothic chapel on my very first day at Strickfield. What a rush! First I want to thank Dame Hilda for founding the colony in memory of Ralph Strickler, her son, who died. Nobody will say how, but

it was awful. Greetings from the great stone castle where many are called but few are, oh, you know.

Mom, they chose me, bad Cynn timer, and not Leon, family crown prince and bum playwright, for this expense-paid summer in the castle; if you have to ask you can't afford it, and fuck you.

Davy was very sweet about it when I got the callback because until last week, he thought we were equals. He's a poet so it shouldn't be a problem, but it is. A guy in a white suit hand-carried the invitation up four flights to our front door. By the time Davy and I opened it he was down in the street, getting into a cab. Davy made me jump for the envelope like this was a game, which it definitely is not.

I think.

Mom, it was for me! Time, place, and dates engraved, with a note added in that fancy, rich-girl handwriting you see in raised silver foil on every Aline Armantout best-seller:

Welcome, writer-in-waiting. At Strickfield, you'll do great things, and this year we're starting something new! Do come. Your future depends on it.

xxxx A.A.

That's all.

Aline herself followed up with a phone call, which is how Davy and I knew it wasn't a joke. I wanted to ask about the *something new* but she said, "Congratulations, you are chosen." Period. Davy gave me Swarovski crystals to prove he isn't mad. Real writers don't have day jobs, so Davy maxed out his plastic to cover the rental car plus gas and snacks along the way to keep me sharp so I can sparkle at the Opening Night Banquet. Everybody, it's black tie!

We drove forever to get here. Strickfield is in the middle of, like, the Black Forest. Who knew it was also shopping hell? No malls anywhere; you can't even order online. In woods like these, delivery kids get hunted down and eaten by bears, and all the pretty things in their packages ripped to shreds. Riding up here, I could swear I saw wolves running along behind the car. They didn't peel off until the castle gates opened up and then clanged shut behind Davy's Zipcar like a giant bear trap.

In spite of which this place is beautiful, although there are rumors about The Thing in The Lake and weird noises coming from the attic. Three months, all expenses paid, what could go wrong?

Well, one thing. Nobody warned me *every single dinner is black tie*. If I do this right I'll be famous. My whole life is at stake and I'm sitting here thinking, *what to wear*?

See, for dress-up, I brought exactly one sexy dress and my Jimmy Choos that I got off a stall—I saw the guy glue in the label himself. Oh, and my present Davy bought to prove he's okay with this—which was big of him, as, whatever the game is, we both know he just lost.

Entre nous, it's just as well Strickfield's just for the chosen, so he's not allowed to stay. When you're in love with a guy, the last thing you want is you and him both fighting over the same prize.

I hope Davy gets home all right.

I hope he won't dump me if I lose.

Unless I'm scared he'll dump me if I win.

Do I love being a writer more than I love my boyfriend? Are we lovers or rivals or what? Not clear. I'm not a poet like he is, so we thought it was okay but it isn't, and that's just bad.

Which is more important, really? My one-and-only or this thing that I don't even know what it is, that I have to do? Does wanting something bigger than

I am make me a writer or is there more? It's not like I can make out the size and shape of my ambition, all I know is that I want this, and I want it *bad*.

Writers work alone but here I am, batched with people who fought, bled and died to make it here, so what's that all about? Probably we'd rather hang out than work, so we're putting off the hard part, where we have to sit down and bash our heads against a wall of words with nobody around to cheer us on. See, at rock bottom what goes on between you and your work is strictly private, in spite of which we cluster in these places, and it scares the crap out of me. Like we're all in a footrace or a beauty contest, with only one prize.

"We expect great things from you." They do. It was on the invitation, but what, exactly, is not written, here or anywhere?

So, are colonies like Strickfield really part of the process? You hear about one person every year when a Strickfield summer ends, and that person starts winning prizes, fame and fortune implied, but what happens to the rest?

I guess you stop hearing about them because the world only wants to hear about winners, right?

Which is why I have to win this thing! No prob. All I have to do is figure out the object of the game—and play the game, but, wait. What if the object of the game is finding out the object of the game?

Oooh, camera, I think I know how my novel starts!

Emerging from the dressing room, Stephanie was sweating thumb tacks that penetrated every soft spot in her body. The regulation satin thong gave her a humiliating wedgie. Her heart constricted under the mandated mini-bra. Her perfume stank and her head wobbled under the weight of her towering hair but she had agreed to enter the Miss Universe pageant and now, next-to-naked, she was heading into the blinding light, exposed like this, on the cavernous stage.

Oh, sorry. I was just—never mind.

It was scary, coming up the walk, like the electrified razor wire on top of the wall was the only thing holding back those monstrous trees. Gnarly bushes loomed like predators crouched to spring. Then Miss Nedobity opened the great front door and everything got worse. Strickfield's successes publish smarmy thank-you notes to this woman; they dedicate books to her, but she's famous for being mean and nobody can figure out why sweet Dame Hilda left her in charge.

This pair of heavily armored boobs came out first, closely followed by the lady herself, with her fierce diamond dog collar and her fuck-you smile. She was all, "Welcome, welcome."

Then she wasn't. *Wham*, she slammed her clipboard into Davy's chest. "Not you," she said, and ticked my name off. "LaMott. You're the last. Now, keep this sheet with you at all times."

It was pink. It was headed: HOUSE RULES, which Miss Nedobity recited in case I couldn't read. "No cell phones at Strickfield. We have a signal blocker, so don't even try. In case of emergency, there's a pay phone in the office; computers, but no Internet; no wandering in the halls after Lights Out; and *no outsiders*."

She snarled at Davy. "And no fraternizing with outsiders either, under pain." She didn't say on pain of what. "And you. You keep to the path when you go to your individual studios in the woods and you stay there until the dinner bell. Don't even think about leaving the grounds. If you're caught trying, you're *out*, and believe me, the

ride away from Strickfield is not pleasant. And whatever you do, never *ever* go down to the lake."

"Not even to swim?"

"No! Read this sheet carefully, memorize it and keep it on your person at all times, because you must never forget even one of these important rules. Your room is on four, it's 13A—take the rear stairwell; it's down that hall. And remember, you don't interface with the others until the banquet. Cocktails at six. Now go."

Davy and I stood there blinking, like, *Whatever happened to hello?* He dragged my stuff inside in spite of her, while I studied the portrait of Dame Hilda above the fireplace and wished to hell she hadn't died. See, Dame Hilda did all the intake interviews, and Davy looks like that portrait of her son. They say she was a sucker for cute guys, although they also say if you happened to be one and she asked you up for coffee in the Morning Room, *watch out*.

Now it's this Miss Nedobity in her don't-fuck-with-me diamonds and black polyester dress, and she could care less that Davy and I are in love. She A-hemmed until we kissed goodbye, and ripped us asunder so fast that I heard the pop and slammed the door on him. So I had to lug all my stuff up four flights because Strickfield rejects don't get past the foyer, Or Else.

The Or Else is spelled out in very small print. There are outdoor strobes and sirens so don't even think about sneaking out, and if your boyfriend or girlfriend makes it over the razor wire . . . Well, there are Dobermans. Like they're scared one of us will be caught having sex with, shudder, an *outsider*, although they don't spell out which of us does what with which others after the gates clang shut.

You read books about Strickfield's famous writers and their famous affairs, but is it, like, mandatory or optional? Miss Nedobity's poop sheet doesn't say. So, is one of the elimination rounds about the sex? Wait. Do you win if you have a lot of it and I should find someone—or if you don't have it at all?

There's a lot I don't understand, like the weirdness I keep hearing overhead, or the hastily scrawled note on my door.

Results may be affected or determined by Outside Event.

Outside Event? Affected or determined? Just tell me. Which is it? Is Strickfield really about art for art's sake or is it something I didn't know about?

Dear Davy, This place is big and creepy and I miss you already.

Department of conjecture:

1. Writers' colony as first rung on the ladder to success, in which case I'm lucky I'm here. Note to self: *What makes you so sure?*
2. Writers' colony as penal colony like in Kafka, and we get tortured if we don't produce?
3. Writers' colony as Olympics, with elimination rounds based on number of pages we crank out?
4. Writers' colony as pressure cooker of human emotions.
 - a. Unexpected love affairs and concomitant infidelity.
 - b. Artistic meltdowns.
 - c. Jealousy and petty quarrels.
 - d. Food fights.
 - e. Potential violence sparked by honest opinions of rival's work.
5. Writers' colony as test match, the prize goes to the best? Note to self: *What is best?*
6. Writers' colony as narrative petri dish, as in: You may wonder why I have gathered you together here.

Which?

None of the above?

All of the above?

Will I go home changed?

Will I go home at all?

—Oh, I know, I know how to start my book!

Now that she was at the destination she'd struggled all her life to reach, lovely Dahlia Eastwood shuddered, thinking: Something is not right. As she approached the manor, the outline of the monumental heap shifted slightly, as though without the occupants knowing it, something profound had changed. From somewhere within came a sound that might have been taken for a prodigious groan, as though the entity inside knew how beautiful she was, and that she had come here alone. The most frightening thing about it was that although she was afraid, she was not surprised.

I'm sorry, I got distracted. I was thinking about my, um, novel, which I'm writing this summer, right? Um, right?

Look. I have to go do wardrobe and makeup for the Opening Night Banquet, first impressions are so important. So, if you're actually shooting this and it isn't just a surveillancecam, are we graded more on promptness or more on our personal look? Charm or number of words produced? Do I have to sell a whole novel to win, or what?

Look. Why don't you just tell me? Like, is the winner the first one to make it to the top?

Or the last one still standing at the end?

The faces you meet are false faces we put on to meet you, and it isn't just me wearing an expression that's not my own. What the twenty of us are doing and what you think we're doing aren't the same.

Smile, girl. Put on your Swarovski chandeliers and crystal flash drive and go down and show yourself to the people. And suss them out.

Behold Cynthia LaMott on the grand staircase at Strickfield, beholding all the other wannabes milling outside the sliding doors to the Great Hall. Down I go in my simple, drop-dead little black dress. I put on Davy's crystals to signify that not only am I better than the others, I am also different, although how I can make this dress look new and exciting every single night . . .

The people I have to beat are milling around down there in the foyer, talking and laughing like they belong, and! The clothes! Did every single woman bring designer dresses but me? I should be draining my debit card at Nordstrom's Rack right now, because every single one of them is dressed to kill or maim.

To tell the truth, that foyer is a lot like the mezzanine at Nordstrom's, with a pianist tinkling while people you'd kill to get friends with mingle in evening clothes.

You see the outfit. The smile, and nothing of the engine that drives me, not even a hint of what's going on underneath the hood. While we scope each other I'm considering:

Is this a death match?

Dog show, with prizes for looks and grooming?

Arena, where we're matched like gladiators?

Coliseum, with lions TK?

Or is this really only about words?

It's too soon to tell.

Idea:

In the grand foyer all but one of the gifted, chosen ten fluttered like trapped pigeons, plucking at each other with anxious fingers. Maribel ran among them, asking, "Where's Brad?" Here for less than a week, and she and Brad Fairchild are lovers, separated since lunch with no hint of where he went. Frantic, she starts the others buzzing, "Has anyone seen Brad?" They were already uneasy, ten strangers summoned to the dismal mansion for a reason, here because of Aunt Matilda's mysterious note.

The day was ending like all the others, until the rhinoceros housekeeper shrieked, "Stay out of the library. Something terrible has happened."

They were no longer ten.

Dear Davy, If only you'd seen me tonight, sexy and dressed to kill.

Okay booth, I'm not supposed to be here, but if I don't tell *somebody*, I'll explode. One night at Strickfield and the pressure is intense. Standing right there on the stairwell, I started my watch list, and five hours later, it's only half done.

People to watch out for:

Edwine Evergood, with her sweet pre-Raphaelite smile and a bunch of stories I totally don't get, in spite of which she's *actually published*, but it's a very small press. Wardrobe A+, potential hard to measure because her stuff is obscure but she already has a book. Is *obscure* a good thing and I should try it? Yuck!

Fred Fisher, he has a story under consideration at *The New Yorker* and he got his hunting memoir into *Esquire*; looks like a lumberjack even in black tie; either too nice or totally confused. *Confused is good, but: Watch out for too nice.* I could never write like Fred. Every page drips testosterone.

And then there's The Great Profile. Suave. Way too suave. Sleek Mark Armitage is older, but not so old that it's creepy; head of some big-time ad agency and, wow, he got an MFA from Columbia nights, and wrote *Trash* in his spare time, slick but arty, already on the AWP short list. Plus, he's too short to be trusted, it's hard to explain. Stingray cowboy boots with the tux and he looks, I don't know. Relentless. Like he could knock you down and walk right over you.

Serena Soleil. I don't care what she writes, she's tall and silky and so gorgeous that you'd just as soon she died.

By dinnertime I'd made some contacts, although it's hard to figure out who matters here. I picked this old guy Cecil to eat with because he's friendly, and too creaky to be a threat, like IBM gave him the gold watch so with nothing to do, he might as well write a book. Well, good luck with that. Unlike certain others who shall remain nameless I'm strong and the youngest if you don't count Alvin Gelb, who is, face it, fourteen and easily confused, which means that whatever it takes, I can beat him out.

I kind of have to. The kid's on the bestseller list.

Cecil says Andover let Alvin out before exams for this, probably because his father is Ted Gelb. He's here in a hand tailored Armani tux, thanks to his famous dad. I bet that's how he got published in the first place and I know it got him on that bestseller list; I mean, whose newspaper is it, anyway? He comes on all cute and preppy but if you ask me, the kid is shiftier and way too smart to be nice.

Dear Davy, I wish I was at our place, where I can work!

Explain to me please how being thrown together with others, everybody

out for the same thing, can help me get good enough at what I do to matter in the world. I work at home! Alone, so how? Contacts, maybe. A big plus on my resume, that's for sure, but in terms of free time and limiting distractions, a month in Solitary with no visitors and no Internet, no phone and no TV would be a lot less distracting. What does sorting out this jumbled mess inside my head have to do with anything we say to each other in this big, intimidating place?

At dinner Dame Hilda's fat nephew Leslie gave the opening speech—Cecil says it's sad that poor Ralph wasn't here to cut the cake, terrible about what happened to him, whatever it was.

This Leslie used to come to Cecil's birthdays when they were little, but he cried and went home before the cake. Miss Nedobity cut this one; it was bitter, like her. Every year bakers replicate the castle with all its turrets and crenelations, plus marzipan chimneys and slate roofs paved in chocolate. If I sleep on my cake will I have nightmares or can I dream this novel and win?

We toasted Dame Hilda with pink champagne and everybody got a little drunk. Then Aline Armantout, who gushes like a game show host, led us down to the Garden of Forking Paths and turned us loose to find our studios in the woods. After breakfast tomorrow that's where we go. Lunch comes in a basket under a checkered napkin, no fraternizing, and don't even think about coming back to the big house before six. They want us to lock ourselves in and think Big Thoughts.

Turns out, if you can't find your studio you're *out*, so this really is a contest and that was the first event.

Poor Cecil. I guess I should have picked a friend with more staying power. He got lost in the woods and we never saw him again. I don't know what they did to him, but Aline says he gave a sweet exit interview in the Confessional and the world will see it when this show finally airs. OMG, we're on a show! We didn't ask her where Cecil went, and she didn't say. It's not like we had a tribal council and everybody got to vote. Aline and Leslie call the shots.

But, hey. Win and it's the Strickfield Wall of Fame! They carve your name into the marble and you get famous, like every winner since this place started. The future is ahead, but what about Davy?

I don't get to see him again until I win or I lose and they kick me out of the colony, and this is what scares me. Right now I don't know which would be worse. What do I have to do to win this?

Meanwhile I hear eerie noises in the attic every night. Unless it's my imagination.

We're all here because of our vivid imaginations, right?

Frightened as she was of the darkness overhead, Gemma knew that sooner or later she had to find out who or what was suffering on the floor above. Every fiber in her body shrieked, "Don't go up there, don't go up there," but if she didn't, she might spend the rest of her life wondering, and never sleep. She would, she thought, go up there, but not until she found somebody she trusted to stand watch while she entered the cavernous maw of the unknown, so that was the issue. Finding someone she can trust.

Dear Davy, I'm just so very, very sorry they made you leave, and I . . .

Memory, imagination, anxiety, that deep, what-if paranoia—everything feeds this question I'm trying so hard to satisfy: what I want, really, and what I want to do. Which is cool, except instead of coming up with answers, I come up dry. Not knowing terrifies me. That and these formal dinners, me up

against the others on wardrobe, on style, everything, all of us gauging the others' level of confidence, all of us asking, all *faux-naïve*, "How did it go today?"

This is what I'm most afraid of. Silence. Not the terrible, silent woods or the cutesy rustic studio where I'm expected to work all alone—no water cooler, no coffee shop—until nightfall, but the silence inside my head.

It's been a long week. I've made kind-of friends with Elly Tarbell. She's a crap poet and therefore not that big of a threat. And I really like Roger Adair, who I hardly noticed last week. His studio is the next one on the hill and when I am staring out the window, which is mostly, I see origami water bombs stuck in the bushes and if I look up at the right time, I see paper airplanes flying out. Until yesterday I thought they were made out of old pages of Roger's most recent, but heading back to the house for dinner I picked one up, and, cool! When I unfolded it, all there was on the paper were two crossed-out lines and a penciled note:

FUCK I'M BORED.

Then last night at dinner . . . (I spent Thursday night making a shift out of Cecil's bedspread—watch out curtains, beware bed sheets and mattress cover, you're next. I can always vary the outfits with a jerkin cut out of that shag rug and when I run out, I'll start on the slipcovers in my studio, where I am trapped from nine A.M. to five, like if I sit there long enough, I can create . . .)

Listen, you overdressed bitches, including Aline Armantout, is this "Project Runway" or are we serious about our work?

Anyway, last night at dinner, I had the paper airplane tucked under a spaghetti strap on my slinky shift, which if I do say so, came out really well. Roger saw it and, zot! We bonded. You should have seen his face when Barton Freeman bragged that he'd knocked out ten thousand words before lunch and Melanie Fangold, who's out-and-proud-of-it said so what, she's halfway through her novel, *Jillville*, it's a sensation and it's going to be a smash.

A bunch of others weighed in, swapping word counts like jocks comparing sex-ploits in some cosmic locker room. Roger stuffed his fist in his mouth to keep from laughing. I couldn't help it, I was laughing too because everybody who is anybody knows that in this game, it isn't how *much* you do, it's how good it is.

I think.

But guess what? Elly Tarbell, who I thought was a dependable summertime friend, said, too loud, "Well, I only wrote one page and . . ." Maybe she should have kept it to herself. Her voice shook, but she was so smug that I hated her for saying, "Then I tore it up."

Let that be a lesson to me, although I don't know if it's about not bragging or shutting up until my book is done. Elly was gone by breakfast, and nobody, not even Miss Nedobity, would tell us where she went.

Dear Davy, borrow if you have to, I need you. Come back. Love.

Nobody in the colony knew about The Thing in The Lake, not even the overbearing housekeeper who herded the colonists like cattle. She harassed them unchecked until the morning that they found the ethereal Wanda Loveland's drenched body on the path that ran downhill from the studios where the chain gang was unhitched every morning and incarcerated separately until she marched them back to the big house every night. Although Miss Finnerty and the other administrators called it suicide by drowning, nobody could dispute the seaweed that shrouded the body and filled the muddy tracks left by whatever dragged poor Wanda's sodden, ravaged body uphill to the spot where she was found.

Okay, Cynnie, don't go there. There isn't any Thing in The Lake at Strickfield and if there was one and I wrote about it, with my luck, it would turn out that's the elimination deal. I want to win this thing! I tried to pump Miss Nedobity, but after Elly left, the Witch of Endor went somewhere inside herself and she won't come out.

Dear Davy, I miss you. You're the only man I trust, but you have your work and we're so busy here . . .

Plus certain people are getting better lunches. Is that a reward for something I don't know about, or some kind of sign? Mine today was Velveeta spread on Ry Krisp with an apple. To keep me regular? At what? Meanwhile Melanie and Barton Freeman came to dinner belching paté and Alvin Gelb wore a chicken bone in his lapel like a merit badge and of course his second novel (he has a contract) is going like wildfire, and this is only Week Two. I don't like Edwine but I have to admire her. She gave them a sour scowl and said ever so sweetly, loud enough for even flabby, fatuous Leslie Strickler to hear, "Quantity doesn't mean quality, does it?" Then she raked us with that sickly sweet, superior smile.

Gotta love Roger. He and I were both breaking up.

Then after dinner Aline gave a little speech about how lucky we were to be still in the running and things will be harder from here on. I thought at least Miss Nedobity would snort derisively, but she just sat there looking moodily into her hands while Aline went on and on about how proud we were making her and Leslie, who hasn't exactly spoken since that first night. "So far so good," she finished, "but remember: Success is unpredictable."

Now, what the hell was that?

Was she, like, foreshadowing the Outside Event?

Then her voice dropped. After way too long, it popped up in a new, perky place. "Work is work but Strickfield is about colleagueship. Which is why Dame Hilda instituted Crit Nights."

Aline was beaming, but I swear I heard somebody groan. "Now, ask your best friend here to tell you the truth about your work."

She said, "Tonight," after which people began to drift away in pairs, at which point I noticed that of the twenty, there weren't twenty of us any more, just enough to pair off neatly, girl-boy, girl-boy, all but Melanie, who went off to her room with a triumphal, above-it-all grin because as a lesbian, she'd won the immunity prize.

Roger made a *get it?* face. I nodded and we paired off. By that time everybody had found somebody, even Alvin Gelb, despite only being fourteen—but, with Serena?

Serena! So sleek. So intent on meeting Alvin's famous dad.

Well, everybody paired off except some dweeb so lame that I never learned his name and Florence Klamm, who has nice clothes and the sparkle of a hermit crab. They straggled off to their single rooms alone and this morning they were gone. Into obscurity, I suppose, no better than they deserve. Strickfield winners make headlines and the rest? Who cares what happens to the rest?

I checked Florence's room today and—score! She left in such a hurry that she forgot her party dresses which, okay, frankly, they look way better on me.

So, if these confessions we're all making *do* get aired? Davy, I want you to know nothing went on between Roger and me except some honest literary criticism. I read his chapter and he read an old story I brought along as backup so chill, Davy, we're just good friends.

Dear Davy, Crit Night was gruesome. You're my best first-reader and the only one I trust . . .

What's risky and more terrifying than showing another writer your unborn work?

Finding the right thing to say about theirs.

We enter the treacherous land of envy and unbidden admiration that we're too choked by anxiety and ambition to express, compounded by the fear that what we read will be so awful that accidental truths will pop out of our rivals' mouths. That resentment will smolder, building until it ignites. Outbursts surface like flash fires, leading to threats and slashed tires, depending on how much we've had to drink; camaraderie can morph into hurt feelings, irremediable rifts, but in the seconds before the flare-up, we were so close!

Last night started well but it ended with Roger and me on the outs: awful, I only had one friend here and now I don't.

It's easier to say something nice about even a close friend's work than to hear him say anything that pleases you.

I want to go home.

Oh, your crit sessions are a great idea. When this show airs, I want the audience to know how useful they are, although of course we'll spare them the gories, like, I'll sign the confidentiality agreement when I win. This is going to air, right? I figured it out! We're shooting the pilot for *Strickfield*, the greatest-ever reality show, um, aren't we? If not, why am I confessing here?

Really. I just wish Roger hadn't gotten so mad at me before I showed him the new opening of my novel. I'm sorry it was only a half-page but there are way too many distractions to get anything done. I wish I'd had time to rewrite it, but—oh, never mind.

I just wish we could write our own futures, but even that's out of our hands and . . . about the attic. I only saw that door open once, when Miss Nedobity took Fred Fisher's bedding upstairs the day *Esquire* blew the whistle on him. Plagiarism. One phone call and he was gone. It makes me feel bad. And anxious. And bad.

Part of me wants to go down to Roger's room and throw myself on his mercy and beg him to like me again so I'll have at least one friend. I need him to sit by the attic stairs while I try to find out what's going on up there, and come up after me if something gets me and I don't come down. It's the least he could do after what he said about my work, but Roger's so pissed off about my crit that he probably wouldn't notice if I packed up and left right now, sobbing my heart out in the night.

Is that moaning I hear? Is it the wind or is it remorse blowing around inside my empty head? Okay, Roger. I'm sorry I said your chapter needed work. I am!

In the woods Martha trails Dennis like a shadow of herself. Dying leaves rustle like old women wringing their hands, whether in grief or anticipation, she cannot say. "Dennis." Before last night they were as one but that changed; she can't find the reason they are here. What if she loses him? What if he abandons her? The thought sours in her mouth. "Wait up!"

"It's this way." Dennis hurries as though he doesn't care whether she follows or not. In the room, my desires come and go weeping, because they do not know

"Oh, Dennis." She begins but when he turns, can't find a way to finish the sentence. "Be patient," he tells her with a look like a perfunctory farewell kiss.

I've come too far to give up now, she thinks and in the next second regret blows into her like a cyclone through an unfinished house.

I shouldn't have come.

*... weeping, because they'll never know
what might have been on other days*

Excitement quickens her steps. Hopes send her pelting after her lover like a school-girl after a soccer ball as the last line comes to her whole.

Unless she stays.

That's it! Wow, talk about your *coup de foudre*.

Unless she stays. I don't need Davy. I know what I'm doing now! All I have to do is get it done, and if Roger and I *both* could win . . .

You bet I feel better, and I have this to say to your peeps before I go down to yet another horrible breakfast where everybody is either too sleepy or too depressed or too hung over to talk.

I don't have enough on paper to make Roger smile at me like he did before terrible Crit Night, but by the end of the week I will.

I think.

Was it so bad that I said his prose was too big for the story? I was only trying to help him. And as for me?

I've scuttled projects X, Y, and Z for this exciting new idea I got in the night. I'm channeling smug, pimplly Alvin Gelb, and my novel is just pouring out!

Last week Roger found out that the wonder kid is writing a book about Strickfield and all of us. The nerve! Alvin's hero is, like, gushing out his puerile thoughts day by day as the summer unwinds. Roger pulled a printout out of the kid's trash while Alvin was outside his studio getting loaded in the woods—so much for rules—and gave it to me, but of course that was before we had Crit Night and Roger stopped speaking to me.

It was still on my desk when I choked down toast and dragged my grieving, wounded self downhill to the shack—excuse me—studio, where we're supposed to write. Alvin's first chapter was lying there like a gift. I won't bore you by quoting Alvin's ostensible book, it's stupid and callow and mean, but for me? One look and . . . Wow!

It was the moment when they zap the corpse with the paddles and the patient comes back to life.

A writers' colony is like a foreign country. Not the right place for paranoid, inner-directed people—introverted, most of us, with careers built on failed efforts to bring order out of the chaos inside our heads. We do what we do in hopes of . . . In hopes. In territory like this we are all xenophobes: touchy, paranoid. Every little thing said or done by the others sinks into sensitive ground, takes root and grows. Like foreigners, we assess the others. Are we the only outsider and they're all native to this place? We're uneasy. Aliens, feeling our way, timidly trying to master the language and to make sense of the currency, calculating everything we do, trying it this way, that, in hopes nobody will find out how foreign we are, rehearsing our lines in perpetual fear of saying something wrong.

Dear Davy, I'm sorry I haven't written. It's been busy here . . .

You bet I am a smug little bastard, I, Alphonse Frankenstein, son of the most notable critic in the whole fucking country, head and shoulders above every single writer in this entire fucking place which they sent me into like a babe unto the wilderness because Dad said my head was getting too big for my body and I was out of control. Well, fuck that, one look and I know I write better than every single one of these half-

baked old writer wannabes in this fucking colony, oh not you, Thalia Fineheart, for you are my best friend in this weird, weird place where Dad planted me like a fucking guidon, like a Crusader in one of his old black-and-white movies that he looks at 24/7, you know, "In the name of God I claim this land for France."

I've found my voice! I came to dinner last night with two thousand words under my belt, and I loved it. Everybody changed color when I told them, which makes me think all those supertime scorecards flashed by certain people are a lie.

I could win this. I could!

Two writers were eliminated during the campfire sing and six more were gone after the staged readings of Serena's astonishing play. Four more lost on wardrobe, deportment, last week's foxtrot contest, which was, if you ask me, totally unfair. Leslie Strickler announced it and Miss Nedobity made us practice at cocktail time every night. I wore Florence's handkerchief point dress and everybody thought I'd flown it in from Bergdorf's or Nieman's; I got points for my look, so, cool, but the contest was a put-up job. Leslie's been taking lessons and puffy as he is, turns out to be quite the twinkler in his patent leather loafers. He danced everybody into the ground except Serena, Alvin, Roger, Melanie and me.

There are so few of us left that I'm getting scared. So far everything's been—well, unpredictable but not unexpected, but we're all strung tight over the Outside Event. Will it be dangerous? Targeted? Specific to each player, which is, face it, what we are, or something bigger and worse?

I should bond with whoever's left because by God it is strange out, and getting stranger. Even the dreadnaught in the diamond dog collar is getting strange. I caught Miss Nedobity on her knees in front of the portrait of the late Ralph Strickler, and the monster of the manor was in tears! Upset much? I couldn't help it, I freaked. And the worst part is, now that Roger isn't speaking to me, I don't have anybody to tell. I need somebody I can sit with at these dinners so we can talk and laugh—you know, like friends. I need a friend!

Dear Davy, I need you. Drop everything. Come!

All any of us wants is to *belong*. We try, but we're always a little off. Hypersensitive. Judgmental. Jumping to conclusions inside our heads: occupational hazard, right? Every little thing we say comes out wrong, or it's taken wrong. Even small gestures are misconstrued and although we try to hide it, at every turn we are assessing: *Are you a winner? Am I?*

As if the worst thing that can happen is losing. Unless it's taking sides and finding out that we chose wrong. Is that why I'm here? Because fiction is the only work I know how to do, but all I really want is to belong?

It's getting weird here. Dinners are weird, just us five and the staff, everybody at the same table, everybody but Roger on edge, no bragging, just nervous blablabla like rain dropping into the hush. We toasted Ralph Strickler's birthday, and everything got even weirder. How could I sleep? I'm in the Confessional at—what is it? Dawn? If I don't win this thing and get on TV, *somebody* needs to know.

It was four A.M. when it started up overhead—shuffling, moaning, I guess—but instead of fading, it intensified. Grief outgrew the attic and poured downstairs. I heard it in the hall, so I had to look, and, OMG. There was a great, quivering blob crouched at the bottom of the attic stairs, OMG, I mean *really*, it was Miss Nedobity in her diamond choker! Slipcovered like a Strickfield sofa in her white canvas nightie. She had her hands over her face and she was crying so hard that I was scared to touch her.

She was sobbing, and I was like: *Is this the Outside Event?*

I said, "Are you all right?"

"I'm so tired. I'm just so tired." I can't afford to get on her bad side so I patted her shoulder. She spread her fingers and peeked through them. "Oh, it's you." Then she wailed, "I wasn't *always* this big!" and cried so hard that I was afraid the others would hear and come out into the hall and, what? Get in on this? "It wasn't always this way."

I kept pat-patting and shushing until she nodded and swallowed hard. Her whole body was heaving but she managed, "I'm sorry, it's his birthday. Again, and I have to make sure he has enough . . . Agh!"

Score. That's *her* in the attic every night. Grieving, like every day is Ralph Strickler's birthday to her.

For a minute I wondered if this show of weakness put me ahead in the run for the finish line, but reason kicked in. Her freaking was in no way organized. Patting and there-there-ing, I rethought.

No, this is not the Outside Event.

I tried to go but she grabbed my wrist and sobbed out her story, which, wow. I need sleep to win this, but I showed solidarity and heard her out. Good thing I did. Her first line was a zinger.

"Ralph and I were in love." By the time she finished I knew more than I wanted to know, and exactly what I needed to know. If I want to get home in one piece, I have to win!

At the end she deflated and went comatose. I tucked in her feet and the tail of her canvas nightshirt and shut the attic door. If somebody else wins this, if I don't make it, I want the world to know what happened to Ralph Strickler was her fault! It bound her to Strickfield with hoops of steel, and now that Dame Hilda's dead, she's the one keeping him under control.

It isn't just the guilt.

They were in love, and she still isn't over it. In fact, she . . . okay, long story short, Miss Nedobity was having sex with Ralph in the elevator; at the bottom the doors opened and he tumbled partway into the hall. She was so scared of Dame Hilda firing her that she pushed the wrong button and the doors slammed shut on the heir of Strickfield's bare neck, blood started gushing out and then . . . What happened to Ralph happened on her watch, but that isn't the worst thing. The worst thing is what she did about it, and what things are like here as a result. She said it was terrible, but if you want to know the truth, it was *disgusting*, what she swore, to keep from losing him . . .

I'll never tell; if I want to win I can't tell you. No! I have to win or I . . .

I have to go. *Really*. See, Miss Nedobity confided that two heads will roll today, unfortunate metaphor, right? I have to hang in until I win. Or Else and no, I won't tell you about the Or Else, it's my big advantage, but I can say this much. It's a matter of life and death. Right now I'm the only player who knows the Or Else and I will damn well win.

DAVY: IGNORE FIRST TELEGRAM. LETTER FOLLOWS.

Melanie went this morning. Aline was poisonously sweet about it. Before breakfast she read Dame Edna on "attitude" straight out of her will. What she really meant was Melanie's sharp, she's stylish and a great writer, but way too feisty to win Miss Popularity which, OMG, is one of the things they're judging us on! Plus, her sexual persuasion is not popular with rich fuddy duddies on the Strickfield board. Which leaves just four of us, Roger and Alvin and Serena with her fantastic wardrobe and her surefire blockbuster. And me.

Gorgeous Serena's a definite threat, especially if they're scoring our videos. If it wasn't for that business between her and Alvin on Crit Night, I'd be a lot more worried than I am. The affair's still going on and it will bring them down, leaving only Roger and me. They'll get expelled for moral terps. I mean, if the judges freaked over Melanie, no way will they have a winner who gets brought up on charges. It's illegal to have sex with a minor in this state. Now, Alvin's big for his age, but, hey. He's fourteen!

We had special breakfast: rashers of bacon and individual omelets. It was because today was Pitch Day.

Aline said, "As you may have guessed, this is a very special day. You four have been chosen on the basis of staying power, and although some of you think production is the main issue here, you might as well know that there's a lot more to writing a book than writing it." Aline Armantout, first-ever Strickfield winner and international bestseller, loved this! She went on with that convicted winner's fuck-you glow.

"There's more to publishing your book than just getting published." I would swear she went: *a-hem*. "Starting with the pitch. Futures hang on promotion. Who makes it and who doesn't."

Then she scared me. "You aren't just selling a book. Who wants a book? There are billions of them out there begging for people's time. They don't need your book."

I looked at Roger. We were both freaking. *OMG, OMG, OMG!*

"You're selling *yourselves*. Today, we work on the pitch."

She flashed a savage smile. "Now, you need to pound protein. Caffeinate, add lots of sugar. Dextrose for energy, darlings. Sparkle! If you put on writing clothes, go put on something classy. Not you, Roger, that craggy look will help you sell, sell, sell."

"Think marketing. Think saturation. Think *sales*." Then she said the scariest thing since Miss Nedobity sobbed out her story last night, including the Or Else. "Your futures depend on it."

Interesting, they downloaded web components for us to work on, for judging only. Aline said, "Understand, you won't see your postings uploaded, you have to *win*. Only the winner's postings go up on the web." Then on the way into the next meeting, she grabbed my elbow so tight that I squeaked and she whispered. The words came into my ear in splinters, like truth squeezed through a cheese grater: "*Understand, the winner will be sworn to secrecy, under pain of—you don't want to know.*" But she only told me, so, wow, wow!

I ached them all, including photo upload and necessary links, OMG I'm posting a new eyecatcher that, the minute they decide I'm the winner, goes up on my blog! Besides, I've had FB, MySpace, Friendster pages since I was ten, so when I win, Cormac McCarthy and Junot Diaz and all my other invisible friends will be the first to know; before I came to Strickfield and lost my connection I texted a gazillion people daily and I'd tweeted squatrillion tweets that got re-re-tweeted around the world, and if I need to give lap dances on Second Life to sell me as a writer, Aline has my demo, although maintaining my Internet presence may cut into work time once I'm famous, and the rest?

I scored at dinnertime schmoozing, wardrobe less so, but if I sell *anything* that will change, unless they expect me to steal to stay gorgeous, which I am totally prepared to do. Personal interview: I used the pitch that got me into Strickfield, although I haven't exactly written the novel: Score! Video presentation: Score. So I'm sitting here in the Confessional after a long day on no sleep saying okay, guys, so far so good, and I'd like to thank you all for . . .

Okay, I did what I had to, to make it this far.

Bottom line. I ratted out Alvin and Serena at dinner. Alvin left screaming, but tonight it's boiled down to Roger and me.

Only two of us left, and if Roger won't concede so we can be together, I'll ... Eeek, is this really me? Promotion means a lot more in this world than I thought when I wrote my very first story in first grade, and the world is bigger and a harder place for artists like me than I thought. When I won grad school prizes for *Creative Writing* I thought my dreams had come true. Then I got into Strickfield and I thought I had it made!

Yeah, right. After Pitch Day I *know*. It doesn't matter how good you are, it's how you sell it. The world is a harsh, judgmental place. If I can't make it here, I won't make it anywhere.

I love making words do what I say, and I love making things up, but if I have to win this to get them out there, then fine. Whatever it takes.

Dear Davy, Turn back. I mean it. There are some things you have to do alone.

Writers try to tell the truth, but some things are too terrible to tell. Fiction expresses what we know, but are reluctant to admit. Sooner or later the things too terrible to talk about, things we're ashamed of and all the things that frighten us transform themselves, and surface in our work.

You can't be here!

Barking dogs split the night. Sirens. Flashing strobe lights, proscriptions in place and threats carried out exactly as warned, inscribed, memorized and forgotten, along with the crumpled green RULES sheet. Ivy LaMont, nearing the top of the Hartfield colony shortlist, is BANG: awake without knowing what woke her or what brings her to her feet in a single bound. She finds herself teetering in front of the bedroom window. Blinking, she leans out into the glare, afraid of what she will see.

She hears a tortured roar. Billy! Her boyfriend Billy is on the near wall of the enclosure, he came all this long way to rescue her. He really loves her; he does! Now he is suspended, halfway in, halfway out, caught on the razor wire, with the great jaws of the leaping Dobermans clashing all too close to his hands yet in extremis as he is, Billy isn't yelling for help. He's calling her name.

"Ivy!"

Oh, Billy, not now.

The boy Ivy loves and left behind has come this long, hard way to get her back. He's risked everything to rescue her, signifying that this is true love. Ivy LaMont, methodically climbing the Hartfield colony shortlist, is up against it now.

"Ivy!"

What she says and does now determines whether she stays or goes and where she should be running downstairs and out into the garden to beg them to call off the dogs and save the boy she thought she loved. If she does, she loses. Miss Trefethen will keep the promise she made to the devil that keeps Hal Harter alive and for so many years, has kept the colony at Hartfield safe. She will feed Ivy, this year's last remaining loser, to what's left of her huge, mangled lover, the greedy, raging Thing in The Lake.

Poleaxed, Ivy thinks:

The Outside Event is nothing like I thought. It comes out of nowhere and it is, as it turns out, specific to me.

Not for the first time, she has to make a decision. If Ivy, who began colony life without guessing how much it would demand of her, pushes through to win the title, and she will or die in the attempt, she'll make such decisions tonight and again and again every day for the rest of her working life. ○

The Music of Werewolves

is a wrenching heavy metal refrain
framed by the crescendo and
decrescendo of screeching chords

as each incarnation transpires
with the rising of the moon
and is reversed in its falling.

The music of werewolves
is rife with a raucous chorus
of howls and blasphemies,

a scherzo of wilding violins
and pounding kettle drums
in a thunderous blood beat.

It is burning-full-moon music,
rich in claw and fang and drool
and the rampaging hunt,

a savage onslaught in which
all of your rage can be released
and your basest hunger sated.

Yet when silence returns,
you can never remember
a single note.



—Bruce Boston

THE PASTRY CHEF, THE NANOTECHNOLOGIST, THE AEROBICS INSTRUCTOR, AND THE PLUMBER

Eugene Mirabelli

A few months ago, Eugene Mirabelli was delighted to learn that he had been given a vodka toast on his eightieth birthday by a group of SF writers who were gathered around the editor of *Esli*—the distinguished Russian science fiction magazine. Gene's latest novel, *Renato, The Painter*, will be out soon from McPherson & Co., publishers. In addition to his fiction, the author writes journalistic pieces on society, politics, and culture for an "alternative newsweekly." For some years he presided over the website *Critical Pages*, and recently resurrected it as a place to post his grumpy articles on economics. In his second story for *Asimov's*, Gene charms us with this tale of an unlikely quartet.

1

One Monday morning Samantha discovered that when the kitchen faucet was running it made strange new sounds. "Wow, the kitchen faucet sounds different," she told Cy. "Listen."

He paused and listened. "It sounds all right to me," he said. He resumed briskly buttering his toast.

She turned off the water. "It didn't used to make those sounds," she said, puzzled. Samantha had been renting the little flat for two years.

"It sounds the same as always," Cy said. He had moved in with her a month ago. "Sounds just like water coming out of an old faucet—burble, burble, burble." He raised his empty coffee cup in the air to show it needed filling.

"But there's another sound *inside* that sound," Samantha said. She brought the coffee to the table, filled their cups, then went to the sink and turned on the water again. "Can you hear the other sounds sort of under it or inside it?"

Cy squinted at the faucet and listened intently for a moment, then shook his head no. "Maybe you're just hearing things," he suggested.

Samantha turned off the water, sat at the table, and sipped her coffee a while. "It's *Italian*," she declared, setting down her cup, smiling.

"You bought Italian coffee?"

"The sounds in the water. It sounds like somebody speaking Italian. What a relief!"

Cy put down his cup and looked across the table at her. "You speak Italian?"

"No. But my father always wanted me to learn. He spoke beautiful Italian."

"Then how do you know the faucet is speaking Italian?"

"Because it *sounds* like Italian. You don't have to speak Italian to know what it sounds like."

"And you think it's speaking Italian."

"Yes. Exactly. Isn't that *amazing*!" she said, clearly surprised and delighted.

Cy studied her a moment. Since moving in with Samantha he had grown acquainted with her odd disconnects—like, right now her hair clip had flipped open and was hanging in a tangle of hair, but she didn't even notice it—and her even odder connects, like her belief that the plants on the windowsill grew better because she talked to them. Now she was taking a jumble of liquid sounds to be the syllables of a language she didn't understand.

"We can get it fixed," he told her. "Call a plumber." He stood up, tossed his car keys deftly from one hand to the other. "But I've got to go. Call a plumber."

"No, no," Samantha said hurriedly. "I don't mind it or anything."

"But if you keep hearing it," he said, heading down the hall to get his coat.

"It doesn't bother me," she said, trailing after him. "And you don't hear it. Why don't we just leave it alone?"

Cy had climbed into his goose-down parka and was already pulling on his gloves. "All right," he said, brushing her cheek with a kiss as he went out the door.

2

Cy and Samantha first met at the reception party given by the Nature & Technology Conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Samantha was standing by the coffee table in a white dress that she had made herself, which may explain why it looked somewhat crooked, and Cy was drawn to her as to a crookedly hung picture that needed to be straightened up. He introduced himself by saying, "I'm in nanotechnology." Samantha waited for him to finish, but when he didn't add anything more, she began to say, "That must be very interest—"

Before she could finish, Cy smiled and told her, "Your earrings don't match."

Samantha lifted a hand, tentatively touched one earring, then the other. "Oh. You're right," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Can I get you some wine?" Cy asked.

She smiled as if the offer surprised her. "Oh, that's so kind of you. But no."

Cy clapped his hand flat on his chest, saying, "Cyrus Kleiner. Cy, for short."

"And I'm Samantha Giardino." She smiled.

"That's a pretty name, Sam."

Samantha got as far as, "Actually, I prefer to be called—" But by then Cy was saying, "What's your line?"

"My line?" she asked, puzzled.

"Like me, I'm in nanotech at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And you? You are?"

"Oh!" She laughed. "I'm the pastry chef at the Café Mondello."

"Really?" He was surprised. "Oh. Well. That's perfectly *all right*. That's *nothing* to

be ashamed of. But how come you're at this conference? It's for scientists, not for sweet things." He smiled, meaning that she herself was a sweet thing.

"We were hired. The Café Mondello caters parties like this." Her bra strap slipped from her shoulder and she tucked it back into place. "That sometimes happens," she said apologetically. "Sorry. Tell me about your no-no-technology."

"No-no technology?" He laughed and thought she was pretty. "A nanometer is a billionth of a meter and nanotech is all about controlling really small but important things, like molecules and atoms."

Cy told her a lot about nanotechnology, not everything and not right there at the conference, but later that evening over dinner at the Gandhi. While they were eating their vegetable curry he told her about his PhD dissertation on water and chlorophyll and the harvesting of light—"Harvesting light," Samantha echoed. "That's so cool."—and about his post-doctoral success at the Molecular Foundry at Berkeley where he was on the team that worked on nanotech membranes for the desalinization of water, and just this week he had come from California to Massachusetts to join this MIT project on nanotech water purification, his area being hydro-turbulence and laminar flow. Over a dessert of kulfi he informed her that in a few years people were going to run out of fresh water, because there wasn't enough on the planet—"Oh, that's not so cool," Samantha murmured—so it was essential to find ways to desalinate and purify water, which was why his project was so important.

Samantha hesitated to tell Cy about pastry, for fear it would bore him and, besides, making pastry wasn't very important. But while they were sipping the sweet milky Indian coffee she did talk a bit about her brother and his wife and their new baby, how they had moved to Connecticut where she visited them on weekends. And outside, before they parted, she told him about her best friend who had been her apartmentmate till she got married this past June and moved to Arizona. Samantha was afraid she sounded lonely—in fact, she was lonely—but she was relieved to see that Cy hadn't noticed at all.

3

Now, Cy liked Samantha, maybe not as intensely as he had a month ago, but he still liked her. His girlfriend back in California had been a forensic accountant, a woman who could pluck a thirty dollar fraud from a three million dollar budget, a woman most difficult to live with. As Cy would tell you himself, Samantha was easy to live with. And though he was discreet and would never tell you this, he had discovered she was very easy in bed—wonderfully, luxuriously easy. But, as he had also discovered, the same easygoing, laid-back acceptance of everything meant she forgot tidiness and kept a messy kitchen. He was trying to correct that, but it was hard. The battered old sink always held a few pots, pans, and bowls, or an assortment of choppers, beaters, strainers, and spoons, or maybe some dishes, spatulas, and bottles. These things would stay there even when sparkling clean until she got around to putting them away.

But she loved to cook and she was good at it. He had seen her roll out pastry dough, roll it out thin as a wafer, then paint it with butter, fold it, roll it out and paint it with butter again, fold it again, roll it out again—sweating over it for an hour at least. Then, having shut this buttery concoction in the oven, she'd not use the timer but, relying on instinct, she'd flip open the oven door, take the now translucent leafy golden shell and transmute it to a delicacy filled with creams or comfits and topped by powdered sugar, all of which she'd then eat, adding back to herself the few ounces she'd subtracted by rolling out the dough. Still, she had a splendid body. Or, to be precise, she would have if she shed a dozen pounds, or even just ten—yes, a mere ten.

The MIT motto is *Mens Sana In Corpore Sano*, a sound mind in a sound body, and Cy liked it. He figured that if Samantha could be led to discipline her body, she'd discipline her mind at the same time. Now this morning she had said she heard running water speaking Italian as it came out of the faucet, and if she wasn't crazy—his California girlfriend was crazy, but not Samantha—then she certainly needed to exercise her thinking and firm up her mind. So when he got to the lab that morning he opened a phone book, went searching for gyms, and found a place near the Café Mondello called Hard Buns Aerobics. Cy enrolled Samantha in an aerobics class that met five days a week.

4

Monday was the only day of the week that the Café Mondello was closed, so, after Cy sped off to MIT that morning, Samantha was able to leisurely wash the breakfast dishes, all the while listening to those new sounds the water made as it poured into the sink. She felt unreasonably happy. If you paid no attention you heard only the usual garbled burbling water, but if you focused and listened carefully you could hear an unhurried stream of words. She couldn't understand the words but, as she could have told Cy, you don't have to understand a language to know you're hearing words. She shut the faucet slowly and gently, feeling it would be rude to turn it off abruptly. In the bathroom she turned on the washbowl faucet—first the cold water tap, then the hot, then both at once. She listened attentively each time, but heard only the familiar sounds of rushing water, and when she flushed the toilet she heard nothing out of the ordinary there, either.

In the bedroom she pulled off her hairclip (she had worn it only because Cy liked it) and tossed it on the bureau. If anybody had ever asked, she would have said she definitely liked Cy, otherwise she wouldn't have had him move in. Cy was a wonderful surprise, the way he came on to her when they first met. And he always surprised her when they made love, too, the way he paused to close the curtains so neatly and arrange the candles and pillows just so. He loved to take her to bed and, frankly, it was flattering that something about her enthralled him, whatever it was. In fact, whenever she felt herself drifting from him she felt guilty, but she forgave herself because she knew that Cy had passion enough for both of them.

Now she tugged the bedclothes straight, or mostly straight—straight enough, anyway—then she stamped into her boots, zipped up her ski jacket, and stepped outside. The air was icy, the sky pure blue, and the sun dazzling. She walked down to the Avenue, singing to herself so softly you wouldn't have heard it unless you were really listening. She stopped at Prospero's Books to buy *Teach Yourself Italian*, then walked along to the Café Mondello, where she unlocked the back door, laid the book on the shelf over the coat hooks, then locked the door and went off to do her Monday errands, still singing.

5

So now Samantha had two things she looked forward to each day. One was her book, *Teach Yourself Italian*, which she studied whenever she had a break at the Café, and the other was Kate Swift, her instructor at Hard Buns Aerobics. Kate didn't actually have hard buns, but when she stripped down to her sports bra and shorts Samantha could see she did have nice snug buttocks and tight abdominal muscles. And she was totally likeable. After her first day in class Samantha had apologized to Kate, saying, "I'm sort of . . . I mean, my body is sort of . . . Well, you can see it."

"Your body looks fine to me," Kate told her. "These exercises will firm it up a bit,

but mostly they'll improve your cardiovascular system. Your heart will have to work less, and that's a good thing." She smiled. "You probably work enough already." A lot of the exercises were done to fast rhythmic music, and Samantha especially liked a piece that Kate herself had composed when she was in a rock band. Samantha brought her a pastry every day, saying something like, "This is our almost-no-fat cannoli," or "Here's something I created, tell me if you like it." After two weeks of classes they had a glass of wine at La Brasserie and Samantha invited Kate to dinner at the little apartment on Friday night.

Cy was surprised when Samantha told him that she had invited her aerobics instructor to dinner, and Samantha herself wondered if the get-together would go well. But it did go well, mostly. In fact, Cy chatted very attentively with Kate Swift and was charming in his own way, though at the beginning he did get stuck in an extra long description of how small a nanometer was, saying it was like a marble compared to the size of the earth, or like a penny to so many zillion dollars, or like something to something else and on and on. But he listened unusually well and was obviously happy that they had so much in common, like when it turned out they both liked rock climbing. They talked about ropes and gear and Cy roguishly offered to arm wrestle with her right there at the table, at which Kate laughed and said she was sure he'd win. By the end of dinner Cy's cheeks were pink from drinking so much wine and he looked quite contented. Then Samantha went to get the coffee, ran some water over the dishes, and when she brought the coffee to the table Cy had leaned over to Kate and was quietly saying, "Sam thinks the faucet speaks Italian."

"Not the faucet," Samantha told Kate. "The *water*. The water running out of the faucet. And only the kitchen faucet."

"And Sam doesn't even *know* Italian," Cy said.

"I'm learning it!" Samantha said hotly. "At work. Maia is teaching me. She knows Italian. And a book. Maia says if I can speak Italian, it will add to the ambiance. Customers will like it."

"What do you think?" Cy asked Kate.

"It sounds right to me," she said. "After all, it's an Italian style café."

"I mean about the faucet, I mean, I mean about the water talking Italian."

"Oh, *that*. That's amazing," Kate said.

"Amazing? *Amazing*? It's impossible!" Cy cried. "You actually believe the water talks Italian?"

"Well, I only just heard it now and it sounds like Italian to me," Kate said.

Cy looked from Samantha to Kate, then from Kate to Samantha. "Where's my coffee?" he said briskly. "One of us needs to be sober and it might as well be *me*."

"It's in your cup," Samantha told him.

The dinner broke up around eleven. Cy volunteered to walk Kate back to her car, but she said no, her car was just across the street, no need for him to bundle up against the cold just for that. He started to embrace her in saying good-bye, but Kate thrust out her hand, so he shook hands instead, while at the same time she stepped past him and kissed Samantha. After Kate had left, Cy remarked that Kate's breasts were unusually small and high, saying, "That's because she exercises all day. It distorts her hormone balance." Cy sounded irritated. "And we should get a plumber," he added.

"A plumber? Why?"

"To fix the kitchen faucet."

"But there's nothing *wrong* with the faucet."

"There is if it speaks to you in Italian. Can you call somebody?"

"All right, I'll call somebody," Samantha said, her voice light and indifferent. "But it won't make any difference."

Saturday morning Cy sped off to the MIT nanotech lab to clean up some work. When he returned at noon, Samantha and a skinny guy in blue jeans had their heads together in the kitchen sink, listening to the water rushing from the faucet over dishes in the sink. They turned around and Samantha said, "Cy, this is Mr. Avakian."

"Pleased to meet you," the guy said, an angular young man with a smile who shook Cy's hand warmly.

"You're the plumber," Cy said, unzipping his big parka.

"Mr. Avakian is a linguist," Samantha said proudly. "That's an expert in language."

"A linguist? A *linguist*? You were supposed to call a plumber!"

"It's Saturday," she said. "I phoned all over the place. None of the plumbers would come unless I paid way too much."

"Do you know how to fix faucets?" Cy asked Mr. Avakian.

"He knows all about language," Samantha said. "He teaches college."

"Oh?" Cy looked at this thin young man who had a light bronze stubble on his jaw and was wearing a black turtleneck sweater. "Where do you teach?"

"At Culinary Arts College," he said.

"Culinary Arts College? They have linguists?"

"Right here in Cambridge," Mr. Avakian said. "On Mount Auburn Street, over by Harvard."

"That's where I learned pastry," Samantha told Cy. "Not at Harvard. At Culinary Arts. So I phoned and asked if any of the professors there knew languages and they gave me Mr. Avakian's name and phone number."

"She said it was an emergency so I came right over," Mr. Avakian told him. "Or I would have shaved."

"And did she tell you the faucet speaks Italian to her?"

"Not the faucet," Mr. Avakian said. "If you listen closely it's the water coming from the faucet."

"The water speaks Italian?"

"It's really *amazing*. Yes." He laughed. "Really amazing."

Cy zipped up his parka, saying decisively, "I'm going to get a plumber." He turned abruptly and left.

After the sound of Cy's slammed door there was a long moment of silence in the kitchen. Then Samantha said, "Maybe I'm hearing imaginary voices. Maybe I'm just crazy." She looked at Mr. Avakian, searched his eyes.

"If two people don't hear the same thing, it doesn't mean one of them is crazy." He smiled ever so slightly. "It's far more likely one of them is a little deaf."

"Cy isn't deaf," she said, rather morose.

"Some people are color blind. Some are tone deaf. Is it possible he's tone deaf?"

"Oh?"

"Some people, even blindfolded, can tell you what key you've struck on the piano. Other people can't tell the difference between C and D when you strike one and then the other. They hear the same sounds each time, even though they're quite different to most people."

Mr. Avakian paused, because Samantha was looking at him so fully that he thought she was about to say something, but she didn't say a word.

"Some people can't hear very, very fine differences in sound," he continued. "The

differences are too small. You told me the sounds to listen to are under or inside the sound of flowing, splashing, gurgling water. Exactly right. But those are very difficult to detect. Impossible for Mr. Giardino to hear them. Or for people like Mr. Giardino."

Samantha laughed and waved her hand as if brushing something away. "There's no Mr. Giardino. He's Mr. *Kleiner*. And I'm Samantha *Giardino*."

"Oh! Heh. Then you're not—"

"Married? No," she said.

"Ah, what a beautiful name you have, Samantha Giardino!" Mr. Avakian looked delighted.

"Actually, it's Samantha Primavera Giardino. My middle name is secret, sort of."

"Samantha Primavera Giardino," he recited, his face like the sky at dawn.

"Please call me Samantha, Mr. Avakian," she said, extending her hand.

"Please call me Zeno," he said, shaking her hand as if he were meeting her for the first time.

Then Samantha turned on the faucet and they leaned their heads together into the sink. They experimented by turning the tap to different flow speeds and by tilting the bowls and the drain sieve at different angles. It sounded best at a moderate speed with dishes and bowls stacked rather crookedly and the sieve set slantwise in the drain. "That's pure Florentine," Zeno murmured, bent deeply into the sink. "What we heard earlier, with all those u sounds, that was Sicilian, I believe."

"What's it saying?" Samantha asked him, keeping her voice low, her head beside his. "I'm still learning words like *aeroplano* and *turistica* from my *Teach Yourself Italian* book."

"A song, a song from—yes!—it's a love song from a comic opera."

Samantha suggested that they experiment by holding different things directly in the stream of water. She brought a bunch of grapes to the sink, and the two leaned their heads together and listened intently. At first Samantha heard only the soft syllables of water flowing smoothly around the grapes, then she heard something like actual vocals. She turned to Zeno just as he turned to her. Their faces were so close she could see the glinting of the sun on the red-gold stubble of his jaw and she saw a place where his lip, his tender lip, was chapped from the winter wind. She moved to kiss him or, no, she didn't move, but hesitantly whispered, "I wonder . . . if we . . . should stop."

And Zeno, who had grabbed the edge of the sink to stop from falling into her dark eyes, replied quietly, as if out of breath. "I was wondering . . . the same . . . thing."

They lifted their heads slowly from the sink so they wouldn't bump each other. Samantha sighed a glum sigh, reluctantly turned off the water, and watched Zeno slip into his thin, threadbare windbreaker jacket. At the door he turned to her and said, "I'm sure you make wonderful pastries."

"I'm a pastry chef, that's all," she told him.

"That's so great, so impressive," he said, clearly impressed.

"Pastry? I don't think so. It's not useful or anything. It's not science."

"It's *art*," Zeno said.

Samantha hesitated. "Oh, I don't think anybody would say that. Do you?"

"Culinary arts are the most necessary arts," Zeno told her. "It takes great imagination to conceive of a superior food, a confection, a confection that doesn't exist, then to create it. And the creative process is so complex, selecting the products of nature—the right eggs, the particular butter, the special flour, the living yeast. And to bring them together in precisely the right amounts and to transform them by rolling or grating or heating, all at exactly the right time. You must have extraordinary talent to be a pastry chef. I'm sure you make wonderful pastries."

"At the Café Mondello, yes. Yes, I do. Yes!" She was so happy, she laughed.

That was on Saturday. On Sunday Samantha noticed that water swirling down the toilet bowl was making strange new sounds. She flushed it a few times, listening attentively each time. The guttural sounds didn't echo any language she had ever heard, but they did sound angry, more angry than plumbing noise should sound. She hesitated to tell Cy any of this, because she wanted not to upset him, but at the same time she didn't want to keep secrets from him, either. After turning it this way and that in her mind, she decided not to tell Cy about the strange sounds until he told her he'd found a plumber who could replace the kitchen faucet. And, furthermore, she was hoping Cy wouldn't be able to get a plumber.

On Monday, after aerobics class, Samantha and Kate Swift went to La Brasserie for drinks. As soon as Samantha had swallowed her first sip of wine she set aside her glass and leaned forward, saying quietly, "I met the most wonderful man the other day. I don't know what to do."

"What's the problem?" Kate said, also speaking quietly.

"The water. I asked him to listen to the water running in the kitchen sink, because I couldn't get a plumber. That's how we met. After he listened he said that Cy was tone deaf and I'm not crazy."

"That doesn't sound like a problem," Kate said.

"I was thinking about him this morning, all morning long at the café, and then he appeared at the pastry counter, as if I had made him up out of thin air. My heart began to beat so hard I could hardly breathe. There was this rushing noise in my ears, like rain, and it was as if everything in the café disappeared and we were standing there together, just us two, talking in the middle of a rain storm."

"Oh, God, *wonderful!* What did you talk about?"

"Cannoli, sfogliatelle, and tiramisu is all I remember."

They drank and sat in silence a while, then Kate asked, "What are you going to do about Cy?"

"That's the problem. It would break his heart if we broke up."

Kate didn't say anything. At last she drained her glass. "I never had my heart go beating like that," she said. "Maybe that's true love, which I also never had. There was a guy in the band and whenever I saw him, it felt like a sword going through me, right here." Kate stabbed her solar plexus. "He was living with a groupie, a girl with a big mouth and blue hair, so I quit the band. After that I had a woman in the sack with me for a while. A needy waif, or so I thought. Stupid me."

"It doesn't seem right, everyone getting the wrong person," Samantha said.

"I'm going to try men again. They can't be worse than women."

Samantha and Kate had a glass of wine every afternoon after aerobics, and Samantha told her how Zeno came into the café every morning to buy a croissant and how she told him about the angry sounds the water made in the toilet bowl. Zeno said he'd come and listen to the water on Saturday.

That same week Cy discovered it was very hard to get a plumber merely to replace a faucet. Plumbers boasted they couldn't get to him for three to five weeks, or they announced they'd have to replace the entire kitchen sink—pipes, cutoff valves, drain, everything—to make it worth their time. He phoned plumbing companies and individual licensed plumbers every day during his lunch break, but had no luck. Then on Friday one of his calls was answered by a plumber on a cell phone who said, yes, man, he himself was The Water Works Plumbing Company and, yes, he could get

there sometime Saturday around noon to replace the faucet. Cy asked was he licensed. The Water Works Plumbing company said no, man, he wasn't licensed. Cy said, "Now that I think of it, I don't give a damn. Come on Saturday." He knew Samantha was reluctant to have the faucet changed and he didn't want to upset her and, besides, the plumber might not come, so after turning it around in his mind a few times, he decided not to tell Samantha until a plumber showed up at the door.

10

Samantha had invited Kate to stop by the apartment on Saturday, and here she was. Cy, feeling outnumbered, decided to go out to buy plumbing tools in case he had to replace the faucet himself. As soon as he had left, Samantha said, "I haven't told him. I feel terrible."

"Haven't told him which?"

"Both. I haven't told him about the angry water in the toilet bowl or about Zeno."

"They say silence is golden," said Kate.

"Would you like an espresso and a biscotti?"

"Absolutely."

There was a knock at the door and it was Zeno Avakian in his thin windbreaker, his cheeks red from the cold, a smile on his face. After introducing Zeno to Kate, and Kate to Zeno, Samantha led the way to the bathroom. Samantha flushed the toilet and they all listened to the water—the way it swirled angrily in the bowl and went down with a vomity choking sound. "That's terrible," Kate said, stepping back. Zeno, staring at the bowl, slowly shook his head. He flushed the toilet and listened attentively, soberly. He flushed it again, listening again. "That's Turkish," he said at last. "Very vulgar Turkish."

"What's it saying?" Samantha asked him.

"Well." Zeno hesitated. "As I said, it's bad slang." It was hard to tell whether Zeno's cheeks were still a bit ruddy from the cold, or if he was ever so slightly blushing.

"What's it saying?" Samantha asked again. "You can tell us."

Zeno cleared his throat. "It's saying, *I'm tired of eating all this crap!* There's a very vulgar word I translate as crap, but it could be translated as something else."

Samantha and Kate said, oh, they understood.

"It's very, very angry," Zeno said. "Very angry."

"I guess that's bad news," Samantha said, reflecting on it. But then she brightened, smiled at Zeno, and said, "Kate and I were going to have espresso and biscotti. Would you join us?"

"Absolutely!" he said.

In the kitchen, Samantha prepared the coffee and Kate brought the cups to the table while Zeno listened to the water streaming into the sink. Then the door flew open and slammed shut and here was Cy with an armful that he dropped on the kitchen table—a hacksaw, two screwdrivers, a wrench, pliers, stem packing, machine oil, and a glittering nickel-plated faucet. He climbed out of his parka and noticed Zeno for the first time. "You are here because . . . ?" Cy asked Zeno.

"Because Samantha wanted me to listen to the water flushing through the toilet bowl."

"Wait, wait!" Cy said. "Let me guess. It spoke to you in *Italian*."

"Turkish."

"You know Turkish?" Cy asked.

"Armenian father, Greek mother, spent my childhood in Istanbul." Zeno told him.

"Of course the toilet bowl speaks Turkish!" Cy cried, throwing up his hands.

"My family left Istanbul as soon as we could," Zeno added.

"We were going to have espresso and biscotti," Samantha said.

"Fine," Cy said, sitting down. "*First* we'll have espresso, *then* I'll change the talking faucet."

"Frankly, I'd change the toilet plumbing first," Kate told him. "It sounds awful. A horrible gargling choking sound. And very angry. As if it were going to explode."

"That reminds me," Samantha said, speaking maybe to Cy or perhaps to Zeno. "There's something I forgot to mention." But before she could mention it, there was a knocking at the door and Cy sprang up to answer it. He returned with an athletic-looking man in a sweater and a quilted outdoor vest, his dark blond hair tied back in a short ponytail.

"This is The Water Works Plumbing Company," Cy announced.

"Jens Stillsen," the man said, setting down his battered tool box.

"Hi, Jens," Kate said rather faintly.

Jens Stillsen simply stood there looking at her for a couple of heartbeats. "Hi, Kate," he replied.

"You two know each other?" Samantha asked.

"We were in a rock band, I think," Kate said. "It's all very vague, a bad memory."

"You went off with some skanky girl," Jens said. "Remember?"

"Wait, it's coming back to me," Kate said. "You were living with that little bitch—I forget her name."

"Hey! What's going on here?" Cy cried. "You're The Water Works Plumbing Company. *Are we going to do plumbing or not?*"

"We were absolutely going to have espresso and biscotti first," Samantha told him. Jens and Kate went on talking, refreshing each other's memory.

"I don't need this," Cy said, apparently exhausted. He dropped into a chair, flopped his head on the table, and closed his eyes.

Zeno leaned over to Samantha and whispered, "Maybe I should leave now."

"Oh, no, no, no, no," Samantha said, grabbing his wrist. She snatched back her hand as if touching him had scorched her. "I wanted to tell you about the water in the shower. It's making strange new sounds. That's what I forgot to mention. Can you listen to it?"

"Yes, of course, yes. What language?"

"It sounds like French to me," she said in a hushed voice. "I studied French in high school."

Samantha and Zeno went to listen to the shower water.

Jens had taken the chair at the corner of the table next to Kate, telling her, "The groupie? No. Of course not. She screamed and threw things. It was hell. What about you?"

Kate laughed. "I couldn't get used to it. I tried, God knows I tried. It was like being in bed with myself. All weirdly familiar down there. It wasn't ever going to work. She didn't scream or throw things, but she made off with my three best sweaters and the only string of pearls I ever owned."

Cy opened his eyes, sat up, and took out his cell phone.

11

In the bathroom, Samantha discovered that the rushing stream from the shower-head needed to strike something before it gave voice to the rapid, rippling fluid sound of French speech. When she or Zeno held a hand or bare arm in the pouring water the syllables came fast, sparkling in the air around them, but the words were so partial and scattered that they made little sense.

"I don't know why it doesn't make whole words. It did before," Samantha said, clearly disappointed.

"Maybe I haven't heard a complete sentence, but I can catch whole words, I think," Zeno said.

"I'm going to add more hot to the mix," she said, turning the shower tap.

"Be careful!" he told her. "Your blouse is getting wet."

"It doesn't matter. I made it myself and it doesn't fit right."

"On the contrary," he said. "It's beautiful and it fits perfectly. But it'll get soaked."

Samantha looked at Zeno a moment. "I hope you won't think badly of me," she told him at last. "But to make it happen—I mean, to make it so the water speaks, I think there's something I have to do first."

12

In the kitchen, Kate Swift and Jens Stillsen were talking about the old band. She said she had heard the band had broken up. "What happened?" she asked Jens.

"Mike gave up pot and took to alcohol and began playing drunk. You can't have a drunk on a keyboard. And Jim, I have to say, was never really good on drums. It became impossible," he told her.

"Do you ever think of forming a new band?"

"I think of it all the time."

Cy Kleiner was on his cell phone, saying, "I know there's a three hour time difference, honey. I've told you that every time you've called. But look outside. It's morning. You should be up by now, having breakfast." And, after a listening a moment, he said, "You're right. I forgot it's Saturday. I apologize."

13

In the bathroom the hot shower water had fogged the window, transforming it to a fuzzy luminous rectangle, and a thick cloud of steam had blossomed in the air around their heads. Zeno had watched Samantha unbutton her blouse, take it off and hang it on a little hook on the closed door. Now she was unclasping her bra and Zeno, still watching her, pulled his shirt wide open, tearing the buttons loose so they shot every which way and bounced on the tiled floor.

14

In the kitchen, Cy Kleiner on his cell phone was saying, "I know. I understand. Accounting is a science, just like nanotechnology. And just as hard. Probably even harder. And I appreciate it more than ever. What? Yes, and I appreciate *you*. And I *miss* you. That's why I called to invite *you*. I want you here." He listened a while, then said, "No problem. I'm not sharing the apartment with Sam anymore. I mean, by the time you get here I'll be living in a different apartment. Sam's moving to New Orleans. He's taken a job as a chef in a restaurant down there."

Jens Stillsen had asked Kate Swift if she had written any music recently.

"A few pieces," Kate said. "A couple I'm not ashamed of. But you know I can't write lyrics."

"I can write lyrics," Jens said.

"I know. I thought of that," she said.

"You still have that slow smile," he said, beginning to lean forward a bit. Kate came forward the rest of the way.

On his cell phone, Cy Kleiner was saying, "Honey, I've always missed you. Always. I need a strong woman near me. You know that. I'm so happy you're coming."

15

The bathroom had filled with steam, so you couldn't see a thing or hear a word through the rushing noise of the shower. Although you couldn't see or hear them, Samantha and Zeno had thrown off their clothes and were standing naked under the crashing downpour with their arms tight around each other, their streaming faces cheek to cheek, whispering the most amazing things to each other while the water sang of Paris, the Champs Elysée, and love in a spring shower.

16

You know what happened next. Cy Kleiner's woman in California, the forensic accountant, came east and moved in with Cy at his new apartment. Kate Swift moved in with Jens Stillsen, and by then Samantha Giardino had already moved in with Zeno Avakian. A short while later the maddened toilet bowl at Samantha's old place did, in fact, explode, blowing all the plumbing in the flat to bits and scattering songs everywhere. ○

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FREE DOG

Jack Skillingstead

Jack Skillingstead recently wed fellow author Nancy Kress. Jack tells us that his latest story “was inspired by the unexpected advent into my daily existence of a real life poodle. Warning: These sorts of things happen when you get married.”

Travis Larson sat in a red leather chair in his attorney's office. Cory the toy poodle curled in his lap, and Larson petted her fluffy gray head. “There must be something we can do,” he said.

The attorney, whose name was Beverman, replied, “She is within her rights.”

“But Cory is *my* dog. The settlement explicitly states that I keep her.”

“And so you have.”

“I don't want Kristine to have a copy.”

“Honestly, Travis, there isn't anything we can do about that.” He moved his finger in the air and Larson's divorce settlement appeared. The lawyer swept virtual pages aside with little flicks of his hand. “There is nothing in your agreement pertaining to Information Transubstantiation. If your former wife wishes to own a copy of your dog, she has every right to do so.”

“But—”

“Look, I understand your feelings. IT caught us all a little by surprise. But you can comfort yourself with the knowledge that you own the first, the original, Corky.”

“Cory,” Larson said.

“Of course. Cory. I'm sorry.”

“Let me show you something,” Larson said.

The attorney closed the divorce file, grabbing the projection out of the air and vanishing it in his fist. “If you could make it brief; I have a meeting in five minutes.”

Larson set Cory on the floor. The dog sat attentively, staring at Larson. There was adoration in the poodle's eyes.

“Up!” Larson commanded, brightly.

Cory jumped up on hind legs. “Round and round and round!” Larson said, his voice high and skirting some mock-maniacal precipice.

Cory danced around in a circle—a canine ballerina en pointe. Around and around and around, his little fluffy ears a quarter turn behind the rest of him.

Beverman nodded and smiled tightly, checking his watch. “Yes, that's very, uh, delightful.”

“I know it's delightful,” Larson said. “And I know you've seen it. But you haven't *seen* it. I taught her that trick and a lot of others. You know, when I was a kid I never had a dog of my own. My sister got a dog, but I didn't.”

Beverman stood up. “Well, as I said—”

“Cory is *my* dog,” Larson said. “I taught him things. I walk him every day. He sits with me when I read or watch TV. I feed him treats. He loves me. Do you think Kristine did anything for Cory? Do you think she even bothered to fill his water bowl?”

“I wouldn't—”

"Trust me. She didn't. She didn't *care* about Cory. She information-ized him for exactly one reason—to hurt me."

Beverman came around the desk and put a fatherly hand on Larson's shoulder. "I've known you a long time, Travis, and I like to think of myself as something more than your legal advisor. I like to think of myself as your friend."

Cory pawed at Larson's leg. He scooped the dog up and held him against his chest. Cory growled at Beverman, who patted Larson's shoulder and backed off a step. "And as your friend," he said, "I advise you to let this go. Your divorce does not enjoin Kristine from owning a copy of your dog. And, frankly, even if such language existed, the propagation of an already information-ized poodle is impossible to halt. You simply have to accept the reality: Information is free."

Larson grunted. Cory, perhaps sensing his distress, started to whine.

A week later Larson was sitting in Central Park on his lunch break, eating a tuna salad sandwich. It was a pleasant spring afternoon, the sky soft and blue and blameless. People wandered the park in shirtsleeves, many walking dogs. Larson was getting over it. He had mostly put IT out of his mind. Then he heard a man's voice say, "Round and round and round!"

Larson turned sharply. A bald man in a business suit stood on the grass not thirty yards from Larson's bench. Larson recognized him. It was DeVris. He and Larson worked for the same investment firm. DeVris clapped his hands and laughed. Before him a toy poodle danced around in a circle on hind legs, floppy ears a quarter turn behind the rest of him.

Around and around and around.

Larson's hand closed into a fist, squirting tuna salad between his fingers. He flung the mess away, jumped up and stalked over to DeVris, wiping his hand on a paper towel.

"Travis," DeVris said. "Look at my—"

"Where did you get that copy?"

"Isn't he adorable? His name's Corky."

"His name is *not* Corky."

"Excuse me?"

"Did my ex-wife put you up to this?"

"I— No, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Kristine didn't give you a copy of 'Corky'?" Larson sneered the misnomer out like a bad taste in his mouth.

"Honestly, Travis, I don't know what you're talking about. Corky was a free download."

"Free download."

DeVris backed away nervously. "Corky" continued to dance around and around and around until DeVris waved his hand and the cheap nanoswarm that comprised the perfect 3D rendering twinkled out.

"For God's sake, Travis. If you want a Corky you can get one of your own. He's all over the web."

"Thanks. I already have one. And his name isn't Corky!"

At home, Larson called his attorney but got Beverman's avatar instead. On his phone's Projektrix he couldn't immediately determine what competency level the avatar occupied. They all looked like the real thing.

"Kristine has set her Cory rip-off loose and it's gone viral. Now we *have* to do something. Do you have any idea how many 'Corky's' I saw just coming home from the office?"

"No, but I know I am currently unavailable for anything but an absolute emergency."

Larson closed his eyes. Competency level: zilch.

"This *is* an emergency," he shouted at the nanorendering of the zilch competency avatar standing on his coffee table.

"I'd be happy to file the details of your message and present them to myself at my earliest possible convenience. Simply state—"

Larson slapped his hand down on the coffee table, scattering the nanoswarm like glittery dust.

Cory the poodle—the real Cory—whined and licked Larson's hand. Larson picked the dog up into his lap and petted him. You couldn't do *that* with a nanoswarm copy.

Larson called his ex and asked her to meet him for lunch. She was an attorney, working corporate cases for a major Manhattan firm. She didn't like being called at the office.

"I'm busy. Why should I meet you for lunch?" she asked.

"Because I want to talk to you about something."

"We're talking right now."

"I mean in person."

"But why?"

"Because I *want to*. Jesus, does it have to be so complicated?"

"Don't shout at me."

"I'm not shouting."

"I don't have to listen to you shout anymore, and I won't listen to it."

"I never shouted. At the most I raised my voice."

"Well, don't raise your voice to me."

Larson took a deep breath. "I won't. I'm sorry. I just want to talk to you about something that's important to me, so I'd like to do it in person."

"All right. Though I still don't know why you can't tell me on the phone. Anyway, my *person* will be at La Bistro at eleven on Monday."

"Thanks. I'll be there."

The next day he dropped Cory off at the groomer's and headed to La Bistro. The dog had seemed morose, but maybe that was just Larson projecting his own mood onto the poodle.

When he arrived at La Bistro, Kristine was already sitting at one of the outdoor tables under the expected Cinzano umbrella. Even sitting, it was obvious she had put on weight—which surprised Larson. Kristine had always been compulsive about her workouts and staying trim. You could even say she was obsessive about it.

The waiter handed him a menu, which Larson ignored. "Thanks for coming," he said to his ex.

She smiled. "You're welcome, I suppose."

"It's about Cory."

"Okay."

"Cory is my dog. You agreed to that in the settlement."

After a strange hesitation, during which her face went a little blank, Kristine replied, "I know perfectly well what I agreed to."

"Well, you kept a copy."

"So?"

"And now *anybody* can get a copy. Why did you do that?"

She didn't seem to hear him, her face gone blank again, staring.

"Are you even listening to me?"

The pause continued another couple of seconds, then her face suddenly animated.

"Of course I'm listening. You're talking about the dog. I know you kept him in the settlement. I signed the document, didn't I?"

"Then why did you cheat and keep a copy? You didn't even like him when we were together."

"Cheat. Interesting word choice. And of course I liked Cory. Otherwise why do you think I'd retain a copy? It's been good having him around. I needed something good, after the divorce. Cory's familiar. That's been a small comfort, after all the changes. And no, I didn't make him generally available. I sent a copy to my friend Twila and she put up the around and around thing as a sample. It caught on—you have to admit, Cory looks pretty cute doing that dance. The sample generated a demand for the full download. Twila asked me if it was okay, and I said of course it was. It's not a big deal, Travis."

"It's a big deal to me."

"Hmm. Hold on a second."

"What?"

Her face went blank, then animated again. "Sorry. I'm here."

"What's going on with you? Wait a minute." He reached across the table and touched her cheek. The tips of his fingers seemed to vanish into her skin to feel *other* skin.

"Hey—" she said in the wrong voice, pulling back so abruptly she almost tipped over backward in her chair.

Larson stood up. "Who the hell are you?"

"She's my person," the Kristine face said. "My assistant. I told you I didn't have time to leave the office. You never listen to me."

"For God's sake."

"By the way, your whole attitude confirms my decision. The less direct contact the better."

"I don't have an attitude."

"Of course you do. Your whole thing is an attitude."

"What are you talking about? My whole thing isn't an attitude. I don't even know what that means. All I wanted was to have a human moment so I could explain why keeping Cory private was important to me. I thought we could do that. Evidently I was wrong."

"Drama."

"And what the hell is up with the name 'Corky'? His name is *Cory* and always has been."

"Twila changed it for the download. Out of deference to you, by the way."

"It's depressing seeing him all over town, answering to the wrong name. It just flattens me."

"God, you and your gloom. Do you have any idea how *exhausting* your negative attitude can be?"

"Uh, guys," the assistant said, her voice, weirdly, coming from behind the Kristine face. "I'm a little uncomfortable with this, okay?"

Kristine said, "We're nearly done, Vina. Travis? My parting advice, if you want it—" "I don't."

"—is: get over it. Not just the dog, but all of it."

"The *Corky* download is the only issue."

"Then get over the Corky download. It's a fad. Tomorrow it will be some other fad. I'm hanging up now. Goodbye."

The face went blank again and then winked out, leaving a stranger's slightly heavy but not unattractive features. "Hi, I'm Vina."

"I suppose you think screwing around with me is funny."

"No, I mean I didn't think—"

"Right," Larson said, his voice rising, "you didn't think." Vina stared at him, level-eyed, and Larson immediately felt like a fool. "I'm sorry. I guess I wanted to say that to Kristine."

"That's okay. She said you were a shouter."

"I didn't shout. I'm not a shouter. Did I shout?"

"Well, in this case it wasn't a shout, per se."

She smiled at him and picked up her menu. It was a lovely smile, like turning a warm light on her face. Larson lingered by the table.

"Are you really going to eat lunch?" he said.

Without looking up, Vina said. "Yes, I really am."

"Do you mind, I mean what if I had lunch with you?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Right. Dumb idea." He started to leave.

"Wait. I don't think there would be any harm in it, do you?" Now she was looking at him, and smiling that smile.

"No, I think it's fine." He sat back down. "I didn't even know they could do that. I mean the thing with the superimposed head."

"Oh, yeah, they can do it. The jector's in my necklace. Look, do you really think this is all right?"

"I don't know. It is if we want it to be."

She seemed to consider that, then closed her menu. "I'm going to have the bouillabaisse."

Beverman's firm was only a few blocks from Larson's midtown office. He walked over the next day, without an appointment. In the outer office a young clean-cut man named Frenkle told him he could expect to wait half an hour before Beverman would be available. "Unless you'd prefer to make an appointment . . ."

"I'll wait." Larson installed himself in a chair, tabbed into *Business Week* magazine and began turning virtual pages, his mind and eyes skimming lightly over an article about the new Chinese ascendancy in commercial aviation.

"Good boy," Frenkle said in a quiet voice.

Larson looked up. Turned aside from his desk and bent forward in his chair, Frenkle was making little petting motions in the air just above a downloaded "Corky" poodle. Larson's stomach muscles tightened. He closed the magazine. The virtual dog was looking at Frenkle with adoration.

"Isn't that frustrating?" Larson said.

"Isn't what frustrating?" Frenkle said.

"Pretending to pet a dog that isn't there."

"Corky's there. I can't touch him, but it's easy to imagine what it would feel like. I used to have a live dog. And Corky reacts just as if I *were* petting him. Honestly, I never thought a virtual dog could be such wonderful company."

"Yeah, who would have thought it?"

A few minutes later Frenkle said, "Mr. Beverman will see you now."

Larson strode into the office like he was storming a beach.

In bed Vina was generous and patient, which inspired Larson to be the same. So different from his lovemaking with Kristine. His ex with her beautiful, model-perfect features and body—it was like he was always watching himself make love to her, separating the person from the body. His body and her body. Like it was the bodies that mattered.

"That was so nice," Vina said, lying in his arms.

"It really was."

She snuggled and kissed his neck. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure."

"Why did you and my boss get divorced?"

"Uh—"

"You don't have to answer that. I'm so dumb sometimes."

"No, it's okay. I don't think I could explain it, though. I mean, you'd have to have been there."

"I understand."

"I wish I did. Do you think I'm too gloomy? That was one of Kristine's raps against me."

"I don't know. You seem okay to me."

"I think I'm okay."

"You two didn't have any kids, did you?"

"No. Just Cory."

"The poodle?"

"Right."

After a while, Vina asked, "Do you ever miss her?"

"He's right in the next room."

"Her—your wife."

"No, not really," he said.

"Not really but sort of, or, No, you don't miss her?"

"What?"

"Never mind." Vina nuzzled his neck and sighed.

But later on, after she fell asleep, Larson acknowledged to himself that, yes, he did miss Kristine. He didn't miss fighting with her all the time. He didn't miss the stress. But he did miss her sometimes. For instance, he missed lying in bed with her after making love—after the self-conscious performance part. And he missed walking into a party with her on his arm—Kristine the great beauty in full-on gorgeous mode. Who wouldn't miss the feeling of being the lucky one, the guy with the most beautiful woman in the room?

But he didn't *miss* miss her. He just missed the *idea* of her, sometimes. The idea of certain aspects of her, not the whole picture.

On Saturday afternoon Larson and Vina took Cory for a walk in the park. Larson had been avoiding the park, after his encounter with DeVris and his Corky download. For a while it seemed half the population of New York City owned a copy of Larson's poodle. But today it wasn't like that; maybe the fad was over and everybody deleted Corky or left him as an unused data file, like a real dog dropped off at the pound and forgotten.

"It was just one of those stupid web-fads," Vina said. "I don't know why it bothered you so much."

"I don't know. All those nanoswarm copies, I felt like it cheapened my real relationship with my dog."

"Why would it?"

"I don't know."

"When you think about it, there's no reason it would unless that's what you wanted it to do."

"Yeah, I guess."

Cory plodded along at the end of his leash, his head down, ears and tail drooping. He stopped once in a while to sniff at the grass, but he wasn't as lively as the fresh air and sunshine should have made him. He wasn't lively at all, and that worried Larson.

Vina slipped her arm around Larson's as they walked. "I might take Cory to the vet," he said. "Poor little guy doesn't have any zip lately."

"How old is he?"

"Nine and a half."

"That's getting up there, for a dog."

"It's not that old."

Vina hunkered next to Cory, who was snuffling at nothing visible for no discernable reason. She ruffled Cory's fluffy head. "You're a good dog, aren't you?" she said.

Cory raised his head, but his ears did not twitch up alertly as they would have if he was feeling better.

Looking at the top of Vina's head, at the part in her thick, coarse hair (so different from Kristine's angel-soft blond tresses), Larson felt a surge of undiluted affection and companionability, which he identified as love.

"Hey," he said.

Vina looked up.

"I'm having a really good day," he said.

"Me, too."

"And you know what?"

She smiled. "What?"

"I'm having it because I'm with you."

Her smile got a lot bigger. "I'm having a *great* day," she said.

They continued their walk, crossing a sunny meadow. Three girls in short, pleated cheerleader skirts and tank tops practiced gymnastically difficult moves, their tight and tan midriffs exposed as they stretched into slow backward flips and executed high, pom-pom waving leaps.

Vina noticed him noticing the girls. Larson couldn't help but notice other girls. His cheating days were over, though. "Show offs," Vina said about the cheerleaders, like she couldn't care less, which maybe she couldn't.

"It's a disgrace, all right," Larson said.

"Did you know I tried out for cheerleaders back in high school?"

"No kidding."

"Yeah, I've got some serious moves. Watch me!"

She skipped a few steps ahead of him, and Larson hated himself for noticing her relative dowdiness. Only minutes ago he was noticing *her*, the girl he was falling in love with. Now the idiot part of his brain was making comparisons. She wore a pair of black Levis and a light gray button down shirt, and when she executed an ungainly cartwheel the shirt fell away, revealing her pasty white skin and love-handles. The cartwheel fell apart and she tumbled onto the grass, laughing. Sitting there, legs spread wide and arms crossed like a pouty child, she said, "Did I make the cut, coach?"

"You bet, kid."

In bed a month later, transported by passion, Larson said, "You look good enough to eat."

"I've been working out."

"Really."

"Going to the gym every day on my lunch break. What do you think?"

"I think you look great, but I always think you look great."

"You're sweet to say that."

"I mean it. But—"

"But what?"

"I don't know. You don't seem like the gym kind of girl."

"I'm not really. But I thought it was time to get in shape."

"Remember when we used to have sex on our lunch breaks?" Larson said.

"Of course I remember. Jeez." She threw the sheet off, exposing her whole body. "So, what do you think of the new me?"

He traced his fingertips over the slight swell of her belly. "I think you could take me with one hand tied behind your back. But I liked the old—"

She sat up suddenly and pushed Larson over on the mattress, hands locked on his wrists, pinning his arms down, straddling him. "Maybe. But I think I'm going to use *both* hands."

Larson was alone in the apartment and it was raining hard. Vina was at the gym. She was always at the gym. Working out and "getting in shape" was stealing more and more of her time. Larson missed her. He didn't miss the idea of her, or certain aspects of her—he missed *her*.

Cory lay curled in his little basket bed. He spent a lot of time in the basket. The vet had diagnosed him, somewhat vaguely, as suffering from intestinal difficulties—something they needed to keep an eye on, since it might or might not be serious. Cory's meds made him even more listless than he'd already become.

The phone trilled. Larson touched it, and Beverman's avatar appeared courtesy of Projektrix. "You're going to *love* this, Travis. Love it."

"Love what?"

"I found a way to get Kristine on the Corky thing."

"I thought you said there was no language in the divorce settlement to—"

"There isn't. I'm not talking about the divorce settlement. I'm talking about intellectual property law. We can successfully argue that you made Cory the poodle he is, by diligent training and a daily regimen. Before you got hold of Cory he was just a generic dog. You said yourself that Kristine had nothing to do with the training, care, and feeding of the beast, right?"

"Right. But there's no such thing as a generic dog."

"Just listen to me. Think of Corky—"

"Cory."

"Whatever. Think of *Cory* as a piano you and Kristine bought. This piano sits in the living room, takes up space, and collects dust. Because nobody seriously plays the piano unless they've *always* played the piano. But you did play, my friend. You wrote songs on that piano. And then when the divorce came, Kristine appropriated a copy of the piano—which was a harmless deed. But she also appropriated *the songs you wrote on it*, which she then promptly infected all over the web."

Larson pressed his fingers to his temples, squinting at his attorney's avatar. "Cory isn't a piano."

"You're missing the point! What made the Corky download popular wasn't the fact that he was a cute poodle. What made him popular was what *you* trained the poodle to do. Around and around and around, for example." Beverman's avatar made a silly whirling motion with his finger. "What made Corky popular were the songs you wrote on him. In other words, Kristine has stolen your intellectual property."

The attorney's avatar rubbed virtual hands together like Scrooge McDuck in a bank vault.

The real Cory struggled up on his feet, whimpering, and dragged himself to his water bowl. Larson kept the bowl close to the poodle's bed, but Cory still had to get up to drink. It was painful to watch.

"What does all that mean?" Larson asked Beverman. "What can we actually do about it?"

"Oh, nothing much."

"Then what's the point?"

"Travis. The poodle is already out of the bag, so to speak. There is no recapturing the information, or retrieving all the thousands of virtual Corkys. But a judgment against Kristine will wound her credibility in the legal profession. If you want to strike back, this is how we do it. Trust me. We could even exact damages, if you want to go that route. But the point is to strike back for your emotional suffering."

"Okay."

"Okay? That's it? After all the—"

"Okay."

Larson killed the avatar. Rain gusted in gritty waves against the wall-to-wall windows. Mid-afternoon and it was dark enough to require lamplight. Cory struggled back to his bed.

"Good dog," Larson said.

Cory's little stub-tail wagged briefly.

Emotional suffering.

Every day, Larson returned to the apartment at lunch to check on Cory, give him his afternoon meds, and see if he needed to go out to the little green patch at the side of the building and relieve himself. The Tuesday after the call from Beverman, Larson found the poodle lying unnaturally still in his little bed. On the floor next to the bed there was a puddle of vomit threaded with blood.

Larson's mouth opened and the breath halted in his chest. He stared hard. Usually you could see the poodle's flank rising and falling when he slept. This time: nothing. Grief squeezed Larson's throat. And then Cory opened his eyes and blinked at him.

The vet wanted to keep Cory overnight, sedated. In the morning they would do an arthroscopic examination.

"What do you think it is?" Larson asked, holding the dog in his arms.

"We won't know until tomorrow. For now there's no sense in speculating."

Larson didn't have the heart to go back to work, so he returned home early to the apartment. Vina was already there. He surprised her in the spare bedroom, which was directly across from the entry. She was wearing his ex-wife's head, modeling herself naked, except for the Projectrix necklace, before the full-length mirror. She turned suddenly at the sound of the door opening, her full breasts swinging, so unlike Kristine's model-modest chest.

"Travis! I—" Her voice behind the blank, motionless, dead expression of Kristine's face.

"Jesus," Larson said. "Could you turn that off, please?"

She touched something on the necklace and the Kristine head vanished. "That's so embarrassing," Vina said. "I was just . . . I don't know."

"Look, don't do that anymore, okay?"

"Okay. Hey, what's wrong? Are you crying or something?"

"I just want you to be you."

"That's easy. I am me." Vina pulled on a robe. She touched his cheek. "Hey, I love you."

He held her. "I love you, too. And you know I don't want you to be like Kristine."

"I know that. I was just playing around with the head. Really."

"And I don't want you to spend every second at the gym, not if you're doing it because of me."

"I'm not. Well, maybe a little bit because of you. It hurts when I see you looking at other girls. But mostly I work out for me."

"It's just looking. It's nothing. And you're perfect already, as far as I'm concerned. I don't care about other girls."

"Aw. You're perfect, too, Trav."

They kissed. "Hey," Vina said, pulling back. "You *are* crying. Travis, where's the dog?"

Larson couldn't sleep. He stared at Vina's face on the pillow beside his. For all her dieting and exercise her features were still thick and plain; she was still *Vina*. Which is all he wanted. He remembered lying next to Kristine and how calm it felt to be with her sleeping body after all the stress and tension of their waking conflicts—Kristine's sleeping face presenting her absence. But Larson was tired of absence.

He slipped from the bed and into the hallway, pulling the bedroom door shut behind him. In the living room he called Beverman's office and left a message, keeping his voice down so he wouldn't wake Vina.

"I'm dropping it. We're not going to sue Kristine."

Larson fixed himself a drink and sat in the living room, listening to the rain. The bourbon helped Larson keep his fear at bay. That's what Kristine used to do for him. She used to keep the fear at bay by her presence. But presence wasn't always enough. Eventually you had to be there all the way, and you had to let somebody else be there all the way, too. Without that, little comforts counted all out of proportion. Even the comfort of a virtual dog you couldn't really touch. Some people needed that. It was a small thing and you were petty to begrudge it. The world only went around so many times in a person's life. If you made it harder than it already was, you were really just this gloomy person—this *shouter*.

Rain blew against the windows. Larson poured another bourbon and stood looking out at the city, at the world moving around through one dark night and already on the way towards the next one. Around and around and around. ○

Galileo's Inkspots Fade into Twilight

Monks and madmen announce the end is near
and in the half-light auroras flare by day.
We look up at the mottled Sun in fear,
while from the north, the ice moves down to stay.

Solar variation, we are told.
Pressure oscillations in the core.
Stars sometimes do that as they get old.
A normal thing for a middle-aged star.

Just a short time, a million years or two
a magnitude dimmer, rarely much more,
not long to wait until it glows anew,
barely a blink in the life of a star

Inkspots now spatter the disk of the sun,
and brightness fades: our last days are begun.

—Geoffrey A. Landis

MY HUSBAND STEINN

Eleanor Arnason

Eleanor Arnason has published six novels, thirty-plus short stories, and some poems. She has won the Tiptree, Mythopoeic, and Spectrum Awards, and has been a finalist for the Nebula and Hugo. Eleanor recently retired from making a living, but continues to write. After too long an absence from our pages, she returns with a perfect tale for our slightly spooky October/November issue. Set in a desolate corner of Iceland, it tells the modern consequences of an ancient monster's peculiar attempts to woo a twenty-first century woman.

I.

There was a woman named Signy, who was a journalist in Reykjavik. Her favorite work was writing about the environment, but she also did articles about art and fine dining. One does what one has to do in order to get by. In her spare time, she was working on a magical realist novel about Iceland in the twentieth century. She had read all the great Latin American writers, the Icelandic family sagas, and the novels of Haldor Laxness. But she hadn't found an approach to the novel that satisfied her.

She had a summer house in the East Fjords. This is a desolate area. The young people leave, because there is no longer any work. The fishing villages along the coast are empty or mostly empty, and there are abandoned farms in the mountains. Signy didn't mind this. She liked solitude and the landscape, and the house had been cheap, because most people wanted vacation homes closer to the capital.

Every chance she got, she drove to her house, taking Highway One into the East Fjords and then an unpaved road up to the house. It stood on a high slope. Behind it was a cliff of black stone; and in front was a long expanse of uncut grass that ended suddenly in a drop off. Beyond the drop off was a headland, an island, and the glimmering ocean. It seemed she ought to be able to see all the way to Norway.

Although it was isolated, the house had all the comforts Signy wanted: a generator, a well, an inside bathroom, a living room furnished with comfortable furniture and a tiny bedroom with a bed and a down coverlet. She spent most weekends there and often entire weeks.

She especially enjoyed getting up in the morning, making coffee, and going out her front door to look at the ocean, while she drank the piping hot coffee.

One morning when she did this, she found a wild swan on the ground in front of

her door. It was dead, its neck broken. She looked at it for some time and then called the police.

"That's strange," the voice on her cell phone said. "We have someone who lives not too far from you. We'll ask him to stop by."

She left the swan where it was and went inside. But she couldn't work on her novel. As the voice on the phone had said, the incident was strange and not in a way she liked.

Early in the afternoon a police car climbed the road to her summer house. It stopped. A big man got out and introduced himself. His name was Hrafn, which means Raven, but there was nothing raven-like about him. His hair was blond, and his eyes pale blue. He looked solid and not especially clever.

He examined the dead swan. "I can't find any tooth marks, which means it wasn't a fox or a dog. In any case, I don't think a fox could kill a bird this big. In my opinion, a human strangled it and left it for you. Can you think of any reason why?"

"No."

"What are your relations with your neighbors?"

"I don't have any."

The policeman looked around. "That's true. Have you quarreled with anyone in Iceland?"

"Only my mother and my ex-boyfriend."

"This does not look like something a mother would do," Hrafn said and asked questions about her boyfriend, writing down her answers. When he was finished taking notes, he said, "I suspect this was done by a boy or several boys. As a rule, anything that looks strange and stupid has been done by boys or drunks, and this is a long way for a drunk to come in order to cause trouble. But I'll find out what your former boyfriend has been doing recently. You might consider going back to Reykjavik for a while. This place is lonely."

Signy shook her head. "I like it here."

"Then keep your door locked and make sure your cell phone is always close at hand. What are you going to do with the swan?"

"Bury it," said Signy.

"It looks fresh, and I know a butcher who will clean it. Can I have it?"

"With gladness," Signy replied.

Hrafn took the dead swan and left. Nothing else happened for a week and more. Signy got back to work on her novel, though she still wasn't satisfied with it.

One morning, ten days after she found the swan, she stepped out of her summer house and found a cod on the ground. It was as long as her arm. Its skin was copper, and so was the one eye she could see. The one visible gill moved slightly. It had not finished dying.

This was beginning to unnerve her. It was just after sunrise. No one was in sight, and this odd gift lay in front of her. Why? Was it a threat? If so, what did it threaten? If it was a gift, why was it left so strangely?

She called the police, then put the cod into her refrigerator. She had to take out both shelves and bend the cod to make it fit.

Midway through the afternoon, a police car drove up, and Hrafn climbed out. She showed him the cod.

"This still might be stupid boys, though how did they get here? You saw no one and heard no cars?"

"That's right."

He left her, walking a ways down the road, then back. "There are no hoof marks and no fresh tire tracks, though it rained yesterday. Of course, the boys might have come over the grass. But from where?" He glanced around at the empty countryside.

"Your boyfriend is in Scotland, by the way. Are you sure you don't want to go back to Reykjavik?"

"I need to talk with editors," Signy said. "I will go back."

"A good idea," Hrafn said. "Are you intending to eat the cod?"

She took it out of the refrigerator and gave it to the big man. He thanked her and said, "The swan was delicious."

She drove back to her apartment in Reykjavik and spent three weeks there, missing her summer house every day. The city was too busy and noisy. She couldn't concentrate on her novel. Finally, she packed her car.

It was getting toward fall, and the days were getting shorter. But the air was mild and fresh once she got out of the city, and the drive to the lonely East Fjords was pleasant. The ocean was on her right. On her left, mountains rose. Iceland's glaciers were shrinking, like glaciers all over the world. But there was still snow and ice on the mountains, and it shone in the morning sunlight. The ocean, when she could see it, flashed white flecks of foam.

She reached the house, unlocked it, and put her groceries away, then set her laptop on the table in the living room. Beyond the front windows was the long slope of grass, the drop off, and the shining ocean. She knew there was a novel in her, a good one.

Three days later, she found a heap of plants in front of her door, wildflowers that had been torn up by their roots. Many of the stalks were broken. Whoever had gathered them was either careless or clumsy.

She called the police again.

"This is getting to be a habit," said the voice on the phone. "I'll tell Hrafn about this. He likes mysteries."

Once again the police car climbed up the mountain, and Hrafn got out. He looked at the heap of flowers, which were all wilted now. "Someone likes you," he said finally. "Maybe it's a very strange schoolboy crush, but there don't seem to be any strange schoolboys around here. I've been asking. You have been private and kept your distance from everyone in the district. People around here don't know you. Usually you need to meet people or at least see them, in order to develop a fixation. So I have no suspects. I think you should consider selling the house."

By this time Signy was getting angry, and the flowers seemed less scary than the dead bird or the dying fish. Terrible things rarely happened in Iceland. She shook her head. She would not leave the house.

Hrafn didn't ask for the flowers. She took them to the drop off and threw them into space, frightening some puffins, which flew off like rockets. That night she went to bed late, after making sure all the doors and windows were locked.

In the middle of the night a voice woke her. "Signy," it called, deep and gruff. "Pretty Signy, you have refused all my gifts. None the less, I love you."

She got up and crept to a window, lifting the curtain just a little. There was a half moon in the sky. By its light she saw a grotesque figure on the grass in front of her house. It was tall and awkward looking, with a big head and long nose. Its hair was a great, stiff thatch, like a patch of dry weeds. It wore ragged pants and nothing else; its bare feet were huge. Of course Signy knew what it was. Every Icelander learned about such creatures. It was a troll, though she had always thought that trolls were imaginary.

"I live in the cliff behind your house," the troll said. "And I have watched you since you moved in. Bit by bit, I have fallen in love with you, and I want to make you my wife, though I can't seem to find the right courting gifts. Please come out. Signy! I have a staff I want to show you. Believe me, the sight of it will make you happy. Do you see how big and thick my nose is? Well, my staff is even bigger and thicker. Imagine how much enjoyment you could get from a stick so large and fine!"

She had never imagined that trolls used euphemisms; but "staff" must be a metaphor, and she was pretty certain she knew for what. If she was right, the troll's staff would split her in two.

"I need some time to think about your offer," she said.

"I'm running out of patience," the troll said. "And my staff is so eager to meet you that it makes me uncomfortable. It has a mind of its own, my staff. But I will give you a few more days. Decide quickly, pretty Signy." He stumped off on his huge feet and was soon out of sight.

Signy stayed awake for the rest of the night, thinking. She could go back to Reykjavik. She ought to be safe there. So far as she had ever heard, trolls never came into the city. But if they were real, as they seemed to be, then they were likely to be everywhere else in Iceland. She could get another summer house, in another district, though she'd lose money selling this one. But the troll might show up at the new house. If she remembered correctly, they could travel fast and far.

Did she want to spend the rest of her life in Reykjavik? Or outside Iceland? As far as she knew Canada did not have trolls, but she didn't want to live there; the U.S. was out of the question.

No, thought Signy. She did not want to give up without a fight. But how was she going to fight? The police were not likely to be any help. She tried to imagine telling Hrafn that her stalker was a creature out of myth. He did not seem like a person with a strong imagination.

She knew trolls turned to stone if sunlight touched them; there were many rocks around Iceland that had once been trolls, or so tradition said. A clever woman would find a way to trick the troll into staying out after sunrise. But she couldn't think of anything, and a trick would be risky. She was pretty certain that he'd be able to crush her house with those huge hands and feet. She'd be left broken in the rubble or pulled out and torn to pieces. Trolls were dangerous.

So, what was she going to do? Flee? Or take a risk?

She kept thinking, until she had an idea. In the morning, she drove to Reykjavik and went shopping. Two days later, she returned to the summer house. She checked the generator and did some simple wiring. Then she ate dinner, turned out the lights, and waited for the troll.

Around midnight, she heard his voice. "Signy, pretty Signy. I have come for your decision. Will you marry me and meet my staff?"

"Just a minute," Signy replied. "I need to turn on some lights and get a good look at you. I won't marry someone I have never seen properly."

"Don't think the lights will do anything to me," said the troll in a warning tone. "I am immune to moonlight, starlight, firelight, and electric light. Only sunlight can do me harm."

The troll was suspicious. Signy hoped her plan would work. "I know that most kinds of light won't hurt you; I want to take a good look at you, before I make a decision."

"Oh very well," grumbled the troll. "But give me time to comb my hair."

Then she heard grunts and moans, as he dragged a comb through his weedy hair. Finally he said, "I'm ready."

Signy turned on the new lights she had installed along the front of her house. They were the biggest full spectrum lamps she could find, and they blazed down on the troll, casting a light that was almost like sunlight.

The troll shouted in anger or pain, Signy could not tell which, and then began to turn, as if intending to run away. But he could not run. The light was not true sunlight, so it did not turn him to stone, as she had hoped it would. Instead, it hardened his exterior. He became like lava that had cooled down and formed a crust. Inside,

the lava was still molten, but the crust constrained it.

The troll's limbs were most affected. They seemed frozen, one hand cast up, both feet planted wide. His torso was still capable of motion. It twisted slowly—oh, so slowly—away from the light. His cry of pain or anger became a low, rumbling groan, so deep that she could barely hear it. Something must be happening to his mouth and throat.

After a while she made coffee and sat at the window, watching the troll. He kept turning, though with increasingly slowness, until the sun came up. Then, as its long, level beams touched him, he turned entirely to stone.

That is that, thought Signy.

But it wasn't.

II.

Things were quiet for several weeks, and Signy got back to her novel. Then one night, when the moon was full, she heard groaning and sobbing outside. A harsh voice cried, "Oh my husband Steinn."

Signy looked out. There was another troll in her front yard, petting and stroking the boulder that had been the first troll. "What will I do without you, husband?" the troll wife cried. "What will happen to our children? How can I care for them and feed them, without your help?"

Then there was more sobbing and petting.

The lights were still up on the front of her house. Signy knew she had protection, if she needed it. "Let me tell you about your husband," she called.

The troll wife turned and stared at the house. She was big and gawky, with a head that looked too large for her body, and a long nose that looked too large for her head. Like the male troll, she was dressed in ragged clothing. In her case, it was a shift with many holes. "What about my husband?" she asked in a threatening tone.

Signy told her about the troll's courtship. When she was done, the troll kicked the boulder. "Sneaking around on me again, were you? You and your bragging. That staff of yours was no larger than a knob or button! It gave me small pleasure over the years. I suppose you thought a human would be easier to please, since every part of them is undersized.

"You gave her food that you could have bought home to your family! We would have enjoyed that swan! That cod would have made a fine dinner! You never gave me flowers, after all the years I worked my hands to the bone for you and your children!" She kicked the boulder again, this time harder, then hopped around on one foot, saying, "Ow!"

Finally, the troll wife calmed down and introduced herself. Her name was Hrauna. She did not live in the cliff behind Signy's house, but farther back in the mountains, and she had two children, one a girl and one a boy. She was obviously a bit emotional, but she did have a problem. How was she going to care for her children without help from her husband Steinn?

Signy thought about this. Her husband's transformation was mostly his fault, but she had to bear some responsibility. She could have moved to Reykjavik or Manitoba. Instead, she chose to stay and fight. It could be said that she had killed the troll, in spite of her respect for ecology and the flora and fauna of Iceland.

"I can bring extra food out from the city, the next time I come," she told Hrauna.

"Thank you," the troll wife said.

Signy went to the city a few days later and came back with food, though she felt surprised about helping a troll. How could a modern woman be dealing with imagi-

nary creatures from the past, who did not have good reputations? She might get in trouble. But the troll wife was already in trouble, and women ought to stick together, even if they were not the same species.

She put the food in a basket on her doorstep: bread and milk, cheese, smoked fish, fresh vegetables. Then she went inside, putting a chair by the light switch. After dark, the troll wife came, lit by a half moon. She must be watching the house from somewhere close by in the mountains. She pawed though the basket and tasted the food, exclaiming. Everything was fine, except the vegetables. She wasn't familiar with cucumbers or with tomatoes, and they seemed strange to her, without much substance or taste.

"They will be good for your children," Signy told her.

"Well, then, I will give them a try. Thank you for your help, Signy. I will bring the basket back in three days." She left, carrying the basket off into the night.

After that they fell into habits. Signy brought extra food to her summer house, and Hrauna came down from the mountains with her two gray, long-nosed children. At first Signy stayed inside by the light switch. But gradually she came to trust the troll wife, and opened her door, setting her chair in the doorway.

Usually the troll wife came on moonlit nights. If she came on a dark night, Signy made sure all the inside lights were on. Bright illumination spilled out through windows and the open door. She could watch the children tumbling in the grass and talk to Hrauna.

Bit by bit, she learned about the troll wife's life. It seemed hard to Signy, without any of the modern conveniences and imported luxuries that human Icelanders enjoyed. For the most part, Hrauna said, the trolls lived by fishing and hunting birds. Sometimes they took a reindeer or a few sheep, but they did this carefully, since they did not want to attract attention. Humans frightened them, with their machines that moved so quickly and made so much noise.

They spun and wove wool, taken from the sheep they took. But they were always short of cloth, and their clothing was always ragged and patched. Of course, they had almost no wood, since there was almost no wood in Iceland, and they lacked metal, except for the human tools they sometimes found.

"A hard life." Hrauna often said. "But it could be worse. There are far fewer humans living in the country these days, especially here in the east; and that is good. But those who remain are so noisy and disruptive!"

At the end of every visit, Hrauna would give the boulder a big, smacking kiss and then a kick. Off the trolls would go, carrying their food, into the darkness.

Maybe she would write a story about trolls for children, Signy thought. The novel didn't seem to be getting anywhere at the moment.

After this had gone on for several months, a police car came up the mountain, and Hrafn climbed out. "Have you had any more trouble?" he asked.

"No, though I put these lights up, just in case." Signy waved at the lamps on the front of her house.

Hrafn looked at them closely, then he said, "I have a cousin who works in a market in the city. According to him, you are buying a lot of food these days. Why? You live alone."

"That's my business," said Signy. "It's nothing illegal."

"Lots of milk," said Hrafn. "I checked around. There are no children missing. Are you feeding a reindeer calf? Are you bribing your stalker with skyr?"

"No," said Signy. "As far as I can tell, he's gone."

"Ah," said Hrafn and looked at the lamps a second time. Then he wished her a good day, climbed into his car, and drove away.

His curiosity was worrying. But he had other things to occupy him, as Signy knew. The Karahnjukar Hydroelectric Project was nearing completion, and a flood of envi-

ronmental protesters were coming into the East Fjords from all over Iceland and Europe. Signy had written about the project, since it and the protesters were big news, but she tried to avoid thinking about it when she was in her summer house. It wasn't the Iceland she wanted to see when she was in the East Fjords; it interfered with her novel, which was going to be modest and down-to-earth.

Everything about the project was oversized. Engineers had built the tallest dam in Europe on a bare highland at the edge of the Vatnajökul glacier, and the backed-up water from two glacial rivers had formed a huge new lake. That part was done, though the lake was still filling. Now giant tunnels were being driven through rock to carry the water to an underground power plant. When the tunnels were complete, and the power plant was in operation, power lines—kilometers of them, strung on a forest of pylons—would carry electricity to the coast, over farms and farmers and flocks of sheep.

The local people mostly liked the project, since it brought money in; they hoped their children would get jobs in the new aluminum plant in Reyðarfjörður and stay in the East Fjords.

It made environmentalists crazy. A pristine environment was being ripped apart, land flooded and rivers drained, and for what? Aluminum and four hundred jobs. What were Icelanders thinking of? Were they out of their minds?

Whether the answer was yes or no, the demonstrations meant that Hrafn was not likely to visit her house, which was south of all the action, and he wouldn't have time to worry about her grocery purchases, while angry demonstrators were pouring buckets of skyr dyed green over public officials.

She told Hrauna about the project one evening, while they sat by the door and the troll children played tag in the dark. The troll wife listened with interest. "That's what all the racket has been. We weren't happy when the Jokulsa í Fljotsdal River dried up, and the Jokulsa a Bru River as well; and we don't care for the new lake in the highlands. We have been hoping that all the racket would end, and things would go back to the way they had been. But you are saying that still more is planned."

"Karahnjúkar isn't finished, and there are plans for more dams and more projects. All Iceland has, besides fish and sheep, is energy, and it's a kind of energy that can't be exported, unless it's turned into something. So the government dreams of aluminum plants. We will grow rich by providing all the cooking pans that Europe needs."

Hrauna didn't understand this part. Trolls don't think much about energy. But she did understand the noise and the dry rivers and the lake where no lake had ever been. "You humans are as active as volcanoes, and it looks as if you are going to do as much harm. I think I need to tell our queen about this."

"Trolls have a queen?" asked Signy.

Hrauna looked embarrassed. "It's something that came from Norway. Lots of us say we ought to have a republic, as you humans do. This is a new land. We shouldn't keep the old ways. But we are slow to change."

"She isn't the queen of all the trolls in Iceland. Every region has its own king or queen. But here in the east the one who rules is Hella."

Hrauna gathered up her children and left with a loping stride that looked awkward, but covered ground rapidly. In a moment or so, she was gone from sight.

What will come of this? Signy wondered. Was it possible that the trolls could stop the project? There were plenty of stories in Iceland about construction projects that ran into trouble when they tried to excavate areas where elves lived. The elves and their houses were not visible to most people. But all at once, equipment didn't work, and drills broke; nothing went forward. After a while, people would decide the problem was elves. Sometimes an elf speaker was called in to ask the elves if they would please move, and sometimes the elves would agree, provided they were given some

peace and quiet, while they packed up. Once they were gone, the project had no further trouble. In other cases, the elves stayed put and the project went around the elves. There were odd jogs in roads in Iceland, due to elf towns.

She had never heard of trolls interfering with construction, but then she had never given trolls a lot of attention. First of all, she had never believed they existed. Second, she had the impression that they kept to the mountains and the interior wastelands; but that was where the project was being built.

Two nights later the troll wife came back. She did not bring her children. "The queen wants to see you," she told Signy. "She wants to hear the story of these troubles from your own mouth. Will you come with me?"

"To what place?"

"Her great hall. It's back in the mountains, and there is no human road. But I can carry you."

At that point, Signy had to make a decision. It was frightening to think of going alone to a troll stronghold. But she was a journalist, and this would make a fine story.

"How do I know I will be safe?" she asked Hrauna.

"Bishop Gvendur took care of most of our troublemakers long ago. Those of us who remain are peaceful."

"Except your husband."

"Steinn was a fool led by that knob he called a staff, and—to be fair—he did not threaten you with anything except marriage."

"That seemed like a threat to me," Signy replied.

"He wasn't much as a husband," the troll wife admitted. "I give you my word that you will not be harmed, and the word of the troll queen as well."

If she didn't go, she would spend the rest of life thinking of what she had missed. Signy nodded.

"Tomorrow night, then," Hrauna said. "I will come as soon as it's dark."

The next day Signy looked at her cell phones. She had a new Nokia with absolutely everything, but it was bulky and difficult to use. Instead she charged an older phone, which included a camera and GPS, but nothing else. She put spare batteries in her pocket and added a small audio recorder. No one would believe her unless she had proof, which meant pictures and an audio recording.

She was too restless to sleep. Instead she drank coffee and watched the ocean, gleaming blue at the end of her slope. Her grass was yellow now. A pair of gyrfalcons raced across the sky.

A little after sunset, Hrauna arrived. Signy closed her door and locked it, putting the key in her pocket. The troll wife gathered her up. She wasn't a large woman, but she was surprised at how easily the troll wife lifted her. "You are light," Hrauna said and turned and set off at a loping run.

As awkward as the troll wife had always seemed, her gait felt smooth, like an Icelandic pony's tolt, a gait that no other horse had. Signy was not a rider, but she had been told that a person could sit on an Icelandic pony and drink tea from a china cup while it tolted. If she had brought tea and a china cup, she could have done the same in Hrauna's arms.

In the dark, under the blazing stars, she had no idea of time. But Hrauna did not stop running soon. The mountain peaks were invisible, except as patches of darkness against the stars. She felt the land, rather than saw it, as Hrauna loped up slopes, then down into valleys. After a while, Signy dozed.

She woke when Hrauna stopped. Opening her eyes, she looked around. The stars were gone. Instead, in front of them fires shone. The troll wife set her down. They were inside a cave or tunnel. Lumpy figures holding torches stood a short distance away.

"Go forward," the troll wife said.

She walked farther into the tunnel. The figures were trolls. Like Hrauna, they were large and gray with rough skins, long noses, and large hands and feet. They wore torn shirts and ragged pants, tied at their waists with pieces of rope, and the torches they carried were made of twisted reeds.

She was looking at poverty, Signy thought, the kind of poverty no modern human Icelandic knew. There were no flashlights here, no imported shirts and sweaters, no Chinese running shoes.

"Come," a troll said harshly, and turned. She followed him along the tunnel, which slanted down. Hrauna came behind her, as did the other torchbearers. Their long shadows stretched past Signy, moving on the tunnel's walls and floor. The air grew dry and dusty. Drawing it in, Signy tasted stone.

At last they arrived at a large, round cave. It must have held a pool of magma once. Now it was empty except for a high chair, roughly made of volcanic stone. More trolls with torches stood around the chair. In it sat a heap of lava, all lumps and crevices, with two eyes like obsidian chips.

The lava moved, leaning forward and fixing Signy with its obsidian eyes. A grating voice spoke.

"Harsh the hand of Signy,
dealing doom to Steinn.
Helpless the troll,
hopeless the ending,
when the battle-swan turned on the lights."

"Well, yes," said Signy. "But it was in self defense."

The rock in the throne leaned back. It was a woman, Signy could see now, with long, pendulous breasts and broad thighs. The gray, pitted face was barely a face, though Signy could make out the eyes, a slash of a mouth, and the nose. A ragged shift covered the queen's torso. On her head was a crown made of gold and garnets. It looked ancient, like the art of the Viking Era. The queen spoke again:

"Tell the tale of human vengeance—
rock ripped and rivers emptied,
fire-old Iceland cored
like Idun's apples,
giving nothing more to gods and men."

She had studied the old stories, while doing research for her book. She knew that Idun's apples kept the Norse gods from aging. But she didn't remember a story about the apples being cored.

Hrauna poked her. "Tell your story, Signy, and speak loudly, so everyone can hear."

Signy looked around. She had thought the cave was empty except for the queen and her retainers. It was not. Trolls stood along the walls, their gray bodies seeming to merge with—or emerge from—the stone. The smallest were knee-high to her. The tallest towered ten meters or more. Like all the trolls she had met so far, they were dressed in ragged clothing: shifts, long shirts, and pants with torn bottoms. Their feet were bare and huge.

Hrauna poked her again, and Signy told the story of the hydroelectric project. The trolls were as silent as stone. In front of her, the queen remained so still that Signy was no longer able to see the person, only a lump of lava with a crown perched on top. There were rocks this oddly shaped all over Iceland, though they did not usually have crowns.

She came to the end of the story and stopped. The troll queen finally stirred. "I will speak plainly and in prose," she said. "The old human heroes could make up poems in the most difficult of times, in the middle of battle and even while being cut down by their enemies. I am not them. Your kin are destroying my land, Signy."

"I have nothing to do with this," Signy protested. "I am opposed to the project and have written against it."

"I did not say you did," the queen replied. "I said it's being done by humans, who are your kin, and now we must decide what to do, if anything."

"Break the dam," said a harsh voice behind Signy.

A second troll said, "Fill in the tunnels."

"Let Jokulsa a Bru run free, as it has always done," a third added.

"What right do humans have to do this to us?" a fourth voice asked.

"Bishop Gvendur would not permit this," another harsh voice put in. "He knew even trolls need a place to live. That's why he left one part of the cliff at Drangey unblessed, so we could live there and get in and out."

This was another story she knew, though not from research. It was both famous and old. Bishop Gvendur—Gudmundur the Good Arason—had been dead for centuries.

The queen lifted a gray, pitted hand. "We will consult about this. Because you are a saga writer, Signy, I would like you to hear our decision. As Odin said in the Hávamál, everything dies except fame. We want our story told."

The hand dropped. The queen slumped, until she looked like a lump of lava once again.

Hrauna tugged at Signy. "Come away."

She followed the troll wife into a new tunnel. Was this the time to take out her phone? She had forgotten it, while in the throne room. But there was no light except the torchlight flickering behind them. If she tried to snap a picture, the flash would go off, almost certainly frightening Hrauna and the other trolls. Frightened folk were dangerous. She decided to wait.

The torchlight faded till they were in complete darkness. Hrauna took Signy's hand. Strange, to feel those huge, hard, rocklike fingers folded around hers. They walked a long way like this. She was in the heart of Iceland, Signy thought, the core the troll queen had mentioned in her poem. There was nothing here except dry air, the smell of rock, and their own footsteps, echoing between bare stone walls.

Hrauna said, "You will stay here."

"Where?"

"We are in a little room, made by a bubble in the lava. It's large enough for a human. I will bring you food and light. Sit down. Be comfortable."

Signy sat down. Hrauna stumped off. After a while, she opened her phone. Light shone out, which was comforting, but she could not find a connection. She took several pictures, using the flash. There was nothing except bare rock. Hardly interesting or proof of anything. She put the phone away.

Hrauna came back finally, carrying a bowl and lamp, both roughly made from stone. The lamp burned oil, which had a familiar smell. The bowl was full of something pale gray and lumpy.

"What is this?" Signy asked.

"Skr."

"Why is it gray?"

"We put in a little ground rock to give texture and flavor. Your human skyr is bland."

The troll wife gave her a bent pewter spoon. This was clearly human. Well, the East Fjords were full of empty farmhouses and fishing villages. If the trolls scavenged, who was harmed? She used the spoon to eat. The skyr was gritty, but edible. A little lava dust would do her no harm.

"The council will take a while," Hrauna said and sat down. "We trolls do not decide quickly."

This was a good time for an interview, Signy thought, and to find the answers to

some questions that had begun to occur to her. She reached into her pocket and turned on the recorder. "What is the oil in the lamp?"

Hrauna looked embarrassed. "Kerosene. We don't need much. For the most part, we like the dark. But what we need we steal from gas stations. We used to use the oil from seals and whales, but it's hard for us to fish in the ocean. Our own boats were out long ago, and there aren't as many human boats to borrow as there used to be. We don't know how to operate the ones with engines. It's easier to steal the kerosene."

"If you like darkness, why do you use torches and lamps?"

"For you, at the moment," Hrauna answered. "And while we don't need light to see, we enjoy it. Moonlight and starlight are lovely, shining on the mountains and the ocean. Fire is useful for cooking, and there is something comforting about the light of torches and lamps. Only sunlight is dangerous."

She thought about this for a moment, then remembered another question. "The queen spoke about Idun's apples getting cored. I don't know that story. Is there one?"

"Yes," said Hrauna. "I will tell it, if you wish. It will take up time."

"Please do," Signy said.

The troll wife began, speaking formally, as if the story came from long ago, when people—even trolls, apparently—spoke in a more elevated fashion.

LOKI AND THE APPLE CORER

"The goddess Idun tended a grove of apple trees that blossomed and bore fruit at the same time. The blossoms were white, with an aroma that was both sweet and delicate. The apples were golden-skinned, with crisp flesh as white as the apple blossoms and a sharp, almost bitter flavor. Everyone who ate them found them delicious. The gods ate them daily, and the apples kept them young.

"Now and then Idun became tired of tending the grove and took a vacation. She had a summer house in the mountains far from Asgard. Sometimes she went there alone; sometimes the god Tyr went with her. He was the bravest of the gods, and she was the kindest of the goddesses. They got along well.

"While she was gone, one of the other goddesses tended the apple grove. Usually it was Frigg—who was Odin's wife, a woman both lovely and wise. But in this story, Freya the goddess of love was chosen.

"At first, everything went well. But then Freya became irritated by the apple cores. When the gods ate the apples, they chewed down to the cores. But the seeds were especially bitter, so they ate no farther. Instead, they tossed the cores into the grass that grew below the apple trees.

"After a day or two, the ground under the trees absorbed the cores. Until then, they were slippery underfoot, and they attracted bugs, which Freya did not like. She was a fastidious goddess with a strong sense of her own beauty. She did not like the way she looked when she batted at flying bugs or slipped on apple cores. So she began to complain to the other gods about their bad manners and lack of neatness. Idun had never done this, and it was difficult for the gods to change their habits. Freya became more and more strident, and the gods no longer took pleasure in eating the apples.

"What should they do with the cores, if they did not throw them into the grass? No one wanted to walk around carrying an apple core as it turned brown, and it seemed wrong to toss the cores in a midden heap. They were, after all, magical and in Idun's care. She might ask about them, when she came home. Finally, Loki said he had an idea.

"Loki was unreliable, and the gods should not have listened, but they were tired of

Freya's complaints. They told Loki to try his idea. He left Asgard, going to the realm of the dwarves, who were the most skillful makers anywhere, and described the thing he wanted them to make.

"We can do this," the dwarves said. "In return, we want the apple cores."

"Why?" asked Loki.

"You gods remain forever young, but we dwarves age. We intend to plant the apple seeds and grow our own grove of youth."

"Loki, who never thought things through, agreed. The dwarves made the device he wanted. It did not look exactly as he imagined. The dwarves improved the idea, as they usually did.

"It was a metal box with a hole on top. A cup rested on the hole, and the hole went through the cup. To the side was an arm on a hinge. A cylinder was attached to the middle of the arm. When the arm was pulled down, the cylinder cut through whatever rested in the cup, and the cutout piece dropped into the box. Then the arm could be lifted, and the object in the cup picked up: a perfectly cored apple.

"This is excellent," Loki said.

"We have added some magic," the dwarves said. "The apples will always rest firmly in the cup, without moving or shifting position, and the cylinder will always cut cleanly. The cores will never get stuck in it, but will always drop neatly into the box. It seems like a lot of work to us, when a knife would work just as well. But we have done as you asked. We expect to get the apple cores in return."

"You will," said Loki, and he took the device back to Asgard. It worked exactly as the dwarves had promised. Freya was no longer troubled by bugs or slippery footing. She returned to her usual lovely and pleasant self. The gods congratulated Loki and ate their apples in peace, enjoying the beauty of the apple grove and the sharp flavor of the fruit. Every day Loki took the full box away and returned with it empty.

"He did not take the cores to the dwarves as he had promised, but to a hiding place only he knew. Maybe he had a plan for using them, or maybe he was simply refusing to keep his word. He was a liar by nature.

"One day soon after, the goddess Frigg looked in her mirror. A white hair shone like silver in her otherwise golden hair. She stormed to her husband Odin, saying, 'Something is wrong.'

"Odin looked at her keenly with his one sharp eye. 'You are right,' he said. 'I can see fine lines on your face, though I don't think they would be visible to anyone except me. I don't think this problem is with you alone. My missing eye has been paining me, and yesterday Thor complained to me about aches in his hammer hand.'

"Something has happened to the apples," said Frigg.

"Yes," said her mighty husband. He lifted the raven named Thought from his shoulder and told it, 'Fly to Idun, and tell her we need her in Asgard.'

"The raven flapped its wide, black wings and took off, sailing into the sky. Idun returned as soon as she got the message.

"What have you done with the apple cores?" she asked. "It is the bitter seeds that keep my trees young."

"Everyone turned and looked at Loki.

"He did it," Freya said. "He has the apple cores."

"Tyr had returned with Idun. He had only one hand, but it was powerful. He grasped Loki around the neck and lifted him off the ground. 'I will hold you here until you strangle, unless you tell us what you have done with the apple cores.'

"Loki could not speak, but he waved his arms desperately, and Tyr set him down, shifting his grip to Loki's arm, so the trickster could not run away.

"I put the cores in a glacier, so they would not decay. Let me go, and I will bring them to you."

"Nonsense," said Tyr. "You will lead me to your hiding place, while I keep a firm grip on you, and I will bring the apple cores back to Idun."

"That is what happened. As soon as Tyr spilled the cores onto the ground below the apple trees, they vanished into the soft, green grass. In a day or two, they were completely gone, absorbed into the ground. The trees regained their power, and the gods became young again. But Tyr let go of Loki in order to gather up the cores, and Loki ran off laughing. He had kept some of the apple seeds and planned to do something with them, though he wasn't sure what. And that is the story."

The troll wife stood up. "I need to look after my children."

She left, and Signy lay in the bare, stone room, the lamp flickering beside her. She had thought of herself as a modern woman, with her cell phone and computer, always connected to the World Wide Web, even in the lonely East Fjords. Now she was in this place out of myth, and she had a new myth about the ancient gods—one she knew she had never heard—on her recorder. Nothing was modern, except her recorder.

She drifted into a dreamless sleep and woke when Hrauna shook her.

"We have made a decision. The queen wants you to hear it."

She got up. "Do you have a bathroom?"

"Pee here," said Hrauna. "We don't intend to use this room again."

She did, while Hrauna waited in the tunnel. Then they walked through darkness together, till torchlight appeared in front of them. Signy felt dirty, in need of a shower and toothbrush. Maybe the trolls wouldn't notice her rumpled hair and morning breath.

Everything was as before: the torches, the trolls, the queen in her chair like a lump of lava. The garnets in her crown glinted redly.

"Grim the choice
that humans give us.
Canyons call us.
Rivers complain.

"Hard the choice
and hard the leaving,
but leave we will
our lovely land."

"Leave?" asked Signy, feeling disappointed. She had been hoping, she realized, that the trolls would interfere with the project.

"Yes," said the troll queen. "Elves have been able to stop human projects, though never anything this big. We have not. As much as possible, we avoid humans.

"We will move into the interior, either into one of the new National Parks or to land so bare that humans will never find a use for it."

"But there are plans for more projects," Signy protested.

"That is your problem. We will do what we must."

"Would you mind if I took a photograph of you?" Signy asked. "This is a historic moment."

The troll queen frowned, then nodded. Signy took out her camera and aimed it. The flash went off. The trolls shouted in surprise and fear. "It is not sunlight," Signy said reassuringly.

"Nonetheless, it is disturbing," the troll queen said. "Don't do it again. Now, go. Write this story down, so people will remember us and our decision and our loss."

Hrauna led her from the troll throne room and through the tunnel that led outside. It was night, and the sky was overcast. Signy could see nothing, though she thought

she could feel the mountains around her: vast, invisible shapes. Hrauna gathered her up and carried her home through the darkness.

"We may not meet again," the troll wife said after she set Signy down. "Farewell." Surprised at herself, Signy hugged the troll wife and wished her the best of luck.

The massive, lumpy creature hugged her in return, then left, loping into the night with her odd gait that looked clumsy, but was rapid and smooth.

Signy went inside and turned on the lights. She checked the picture in her cell phone. Only the troll queen was visible, and the glare of the flash had removed all detail. Hella was an oddly shaped rock resting on another oddly shaped rock. The garnet crown was a handful of glints, which might well have been crystals in lava. Her two eyes were two more glints. Well, that was not useful, Signy thought. She turned on her recorder and listened to Hrauna's story. The troll wife's harsh voice was perfectly understandable, though she did not speak modern Icelandic. This was a voice from the past. She would take the recording to someone at the university, an expert on Old Icelandic, and see what response she got. But it was not proof that trolls existed, only that someone somewhere spoke an odd version of Icelandic.

The troll queen had asked her to write down the story of their meeting and the trolls' decision. She would do that. But she had no proof. As far as anyone could tell, the story was fiction. Fiction or not, it said something that was important, something that was true, whether or not people realized it was true.

And that is that, she thought.

But it wasn't.

III.

A week or two later, Hrafn drove back up. He climbed out of his car and said, "I forgot to mention, the cod was excellent. It may have been the best cod I have ever eaten. And it was so handsome that I took a picture of it, before I began to clean it. Thank you."

Signy told him he was welcome.

He looked at the lights on the front of her house again. "I have been thinking about your groceries. Have you been making skyr for the demonstrators? They are pouring it on all kinds of respectable officials. Someone is making it, a lot of it, and in every possible color."

"No," said Signy. "If you must know, I have been feeding the puffins."

"Milk and cookies?" Hrafn asked.

"I am eccentric."

"It might be interesting to eat a puffin that has been fed on milk and cookies," Hrafn said thoughtfully. "If you decide to cook any of your guests, give me a call."

He walked around the boulder that had been Steinn. "I remember this from my last visit. It was new then."

"A gift from my stalker," Signy said. "His last gift, before he vanished."

"How did he move it?" Hrafn wondered.

"I can't tell you."

"There's a story here," Hrafn said. "If I had time, I would try to find it out. But I must defend respected officials from skyr."

He left and she went back to working on the story of the trolls. Another week passed. Then, one night there was a knock on her front door. She opened it. Hrauna stood there, blinking at the bright electric light.

"Hrauna!" Signy said with pleasure.

"I have another message from our queen. We are leaving in ten nights, and she

would like you to come as a witness. I could take you there, but I will not be able to bring you back. Can you get to the Dark Canyon in your noisy metal machine?"

"Yes," Signy said. There was a road, though she had not traveled it since the Jokulsá a Bru River stopped flowing through the canyon. She had gone to say farewell to the river, before the dam shut it off. A sad journey.

"Come in ten nights. There will be a moon, so you will be able to see. I will meet you at the canyon's edge. Don't worry about finding me. I will find you."

"I will come," said Signy.

Hrauna left, and Signy went back to reading. She was going back over all the myths about the old gods, looking for a version of the story of Loki and the apple corer. So far she had not found it.

The night came, and she drove to the Dark Canyon. The sky was clear, except for a few clouds in the east over the ocean. The moon was three quarters full. She had no trouble along the way. When she reached the canyon, a lumpy figure stepped into the road and waved her down. It was Hrauna. "Stop your machine here," the troll wife said. "I will lead you the rest of the way."

They walked over rough ground to the canyon's edge. She could not estimate the depth, since most of the canyon was hidden by shadow. But she knew it varied between 100 and 150 meters deep. Before the project, a turbulent river had filled the bottom. Now it was dry. She heard wind whispering and no other sound. Moonlight lit the far wall, maybe seventy-five meters away. She could see the sheer, bare, dark rock clearly.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Wait," answered Hrauna.

She peered into the darkness. Clouds were blowing in, and the moonlight became less clear and steady. It moved over the canyon walls, growing dim, then bright, then dim again, as clouds flew past the moon.

"We hoped for this," said Hrauna. "We did not want people to see us leaving."

"But you picked a moonlit night."

"For you."

Now she saw motion in the moving light. Large figures were climbing up the canyon walls.

"The trolls," said Hrauna. "We had many settlements along the river. All are leaving."

The first figures reached the canyon rim, some on their side, though none close to them. Most were on the far side. They lowered ropes and pulled up packs. The packs were loaded on waiting trolls, who moved off, bent double by the weight of their loads.

More trolls arrived on the surface. Some were children, clinging to their mothers' backs. Others seemed ancient and were brought up in rope slings. They all gathered packs or bags and moved inland.

More came, then more. There were hundreds.

Now she saw other figures among the trolls. They were smaller and slimmer and moved with far more grace.

"Who are those?" she asked.

"Elves. They are leaving too. This project is too big for them to stop."

When they reached the surface, the elves seemed to flicker, becoming impossible to see in the changing moonlight. Was that a person or a shadow moving over the bare rock among the trolls?

Still more figures climbed up, among the trolls and elves. These seemed both insubstantial and faintly luminous. They gleamed in the Dark Canyon like wisps of moonlit mist.

"And those?" asked Signy.

"Human ghosts. We are taking their bones with us, so they won't be left alone here."

A man climbed onto the rim not far from them. He was dressed like someone from the saga era. A sword hung at his side. His hair was blond, and he had a short, neatly trimmed blond beard. He turned and bent down, helping a woman onto the rim. She also appeared to come from the early days of Iceland. Two gold brooches gleamed on her shoulders. Her hair was long and very blond, more like silver than gold.

They paused a moment, hand in hand, then looked at Signy and Hrauna. The man's eyes were pale and piercing. His gaze seemed to go through Signy like a spear. What did he see? How did she appear to someone so old and so obviously heroic? It was like looking at Gunnar of Hlidarend or Grettir Asmundarson, though neither of them had died around here.

The woman nodded graciously, like a queen. Then the two of them turned, and Signy saw a great, dark splotch across the back of the man's shirt. "What is that?" she asked.

"I don't know for certain," Hrauna said. "But I think it's blood from his death blow. He must have been struck from behind, maybe by someone he trusted."

The couple were moving away, heading inland. The woman looked unharmed, but she had died young.

"Who are they? What is their story?"

"Dead people from long ago," said Hrauna. "I don't know otherwise."

The departure continued: trolls and elves and ghosts. More clouds covering the sky. The moonlight became a dim erratic glimmer, and Signy found it more and more difficult to see anything.

At last, Hrauna said, "I must go now. The queen wants you to describe this. It may not seem important to humans, but to us leaving a place where we have lived for so long matters."

"I will do it," Signy said.

Hrauna walked away along the canyon's rim, following the two ghosts.

Only a few figures still climbed the canyon's walls. Signy exhaled. She was not sure what she was feeling, but it was something profound.

"That was a sight," a voice said behind her,

She started. A hand grabbed her arm. "Careful, or you will fall in the canyon."

She turned. It was Hrafn, dressed in casual clothing, with binoculars around his neck.

"What are you doing here?"

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"I followed you from your house with my lights out, then parked and crept as close as I dared. I didn't want to attract the troll's attention.

"I've been watching you when I have the time. Something was obviously going on. Either it had to do with the demonstrations, though I thought that was unlikely, or it had to do with trolls. That was the only reason I could imagine for the full spectrum lights on the front of your house, and that was the only explanation I could think of for your new boulder."

He grinned, looking happy. "It's lucky that I was near when you drove out tonight. I would have hated to miss this."

"What are you going to do?" Signy asked.

"Nothing. It's not illegal to consort with trolls."

"They are leaving. We have driven them out with the project."

"I realize that." He glanced at the canyon. As far as Signy could tell, it was empty now. "I have read your articles. I know you don't like the project."

"Do you?"

"I haven't decided. It may prove to be too expensive. One of my cousins is an economist, and he worries about that. Iceland's economy is always fragile, Ingolfur says, and we have to be careful how we spend our money. Another cousin is a geologist, and he isn't sure the land here is entirely stable. What happens if there are earthquakes or volcanic activity? Will the dams and tunnels hold?"

"But I grew up here, and I always wanted to return. I was lucky enough to find the job I have. But most of the people I grew up with are in Reykjavik. If the project brings work here, that is good, and if it helps the national economy, that also is good. So I haven't made up my mind.

"Why don't you drive home? I'll follow with my lights on and make sure you are safe."

She could think of no argument. So she drove back to her summer house, the headlights of his car behind her.

After they had both stopped, he got out and walked to her car. "There's a new restaurant in Reydarfjord that isn't bad. One of my cousins is a partner."

"The one who works in the market?" Signy asked.

"No. The economist. He isn't sure Karahnjukar is a good idea, but he thinks it will keep his restaurant in business. Would you join me for dinner there sometime? I owe you at least one dinner in return for the swan and the cod."

He was far more clever than she had thought at first, and he was the only person certain to believe her when she talked about trolls. She wanted to know how he'd kept track of her. Had he simply been watching with binoculars, or was he using some kind of electronic device? She'd like to know the answer to that question, and it might lead to an article. Are the Icelandic police like the F.B.I.? Has 9/11 led to the erosion of Icelandic liberty?

It was also true that she found him attractive. If he didn't turn out to be a spy or criminal, like the police in America, she would like to get to know him better.

So she told him, "Yes."

He smiled and nodded, told her "good night," and left.

She unlocked her door and went in, turning on the lights. Her little summer house looked strange and unfamiliar, after the sight of the trolls leaving the Dark Canyon. Who was she? And what was this land that she had thought she knew? She would have to rethink her novel, though she wasn't sure she wanted to include trolls. The ghosts, maybe.

Signy made coffee and set out some cookies. The troll children wouldn't be coming back to ask for them. She would have to eat them herself.

Then she sat down and opened a notebook.

And that was that. ○

TO LIVE AND DIE IN GIBBONTOWN

Derek Künsken

Derek Künsken is a writer living in Gatineau, Québec. His fiction has sold to *On Spec*, *Black Gate*, *sub-Terrain*, and *Esli*. Although he trained as a molecular biologist, he left science to work with street children in Latin America, and eventually found a career in refugee issues. When not writing, he is invariably to be found with his six-year old son, playing with action figures, building forts, and reading comic books. His second story for *Asimov's* is a social satire about murderous monkeys and apes who tenuously co-exist in an outrageous, post-human world.

Murray slips the cool steel of the silencer into my palm. My hearing, augmented with somatic genetic modifications from bats, picks up the scrape of machined metal against thickened skin. I screw the silencer onto the muzzle, using my palm to muffle the rasp.

I'm Reggie and I'm a businessman.

Murray gives me the scope. I do a quick sighting, and then slide it onto the rifle.

I'm really good at what I do.

Murray passes me a clip of ceramic 7.62 rounds. I don't care how thick your force field is. It ain't stoppin' these puppies.

What I do isn't exactly tea conversation. I kill old people. The older, richer, and droolier the better.

Me and Murray have swung high into a tree in the park overlooking the official residence of the Bonobo Embassy. Through the scope, I see my target. An ancient bonobo female, lanky, tangled hair hanging in patches around cheeks and chin. Gray tits sagging flat and wrinkly like broken balloons. The stained, white padding around her waist doesn't seem to be doing its job of holding in what needs holding, and flies buzz. She wheezes, staring out of the compound, searching the trees, looking for danger.

Sorry, old hag, but I've got you this time. I don't care whose mother you are. I'm the angel of death and I bring—

Something loud snaps behind me. Murray, and all my equipment, knock against my back. I hold onto the branch and don't make a sound, but dumb-ass, butterfingers Murray drops my GPS and a set of small screwdrivers. They tinkle down, hitting every goddamn branch. His furry orange face stares at me, lips forming a big O.

Alexandra the Bonobo, the ambassador's mother, jolts from her seat and stands

straight. Her diaper gives out at the same time, and plops between her feet with a hypnotically sickening splash. The old hag points at me.

"You're a failure, you no-assed macaque afterbirth!" she shrieks. "You couldn't kill a blind, one-armed, no-legged spider-monkey! Go back to eating fruit, you mouth-breathing loser!"

That's a bit harsh. I like fruit. She follows it with a stream of racist epithets and froths at the mouth by the time she gets to "The only thing I hate worse than macaques are gibbons!" Racist bitch. I hate bonobos.

I'd love to yell back, but embassy security pours into the yard. They're carrying pistols with metal rounds. Won't get through their own force field, but I don't want to be here when their marksmen come out, or the Gibbon police get here. My visa status is dodgy enough as it is.

"Dumb-ass!" I yell. I smack Murray. I regret it immediately. I hit him hard enough to hurt myself on the carbon-nanotube-reinforced skin under his brown fur. I did the job myself and did it pretty good. Flexible enough to keep his skin looking real, but still hard enough to be damn near bulletproof. Problem is, my sidekick is clumsy and follows instructions like a Guatemalan pack burro. My hand still stings and security guys are pulling their binoculars. Alexandra the Bonobo fills the air with obscenities that would make a hooker blush.

"Murray, you dumb chimp! What kind of an operation are we running here? What happened to professionals, huh? What do I pay you for?" I stab a finger downward. "Carry the damn equipment down and pick up my tools!"

Murray scrambles down the tree with a harried look. I scamper down the other side where Embassy security won't get a good look at me. At the bottom of the tree, we're shielded from view. Murray is fumbling my screwdrivers out of the grass of the park like he's preening the lawn. Sirens whine in the distance.

"All right! All right! Come on! Forget the screwdrivers! Get in the car!"

We high tail it (no pun intended) to my Renault 4L, the finest car produced in its price range in France, Colombia, and Slovenia in the early seventies. As far as I know, there are no other cars in this price range. I won it in a drunken contest of strength from a big, ham-handed gorilla who got deported a few weeks ago.

Those two events are entirely unrelated, by the way.

He was pissed when he found out about my myofibril-augments, but like they say, you shouldn't hustle people strange to you.

The little red box of a car leans heavily to the passenger side as Murray gets in. I'm too light to balance it when I get behind the wheel. I'd love to squeal the tires to make our getaway, but I'm still learning the clutch, and it doesn't have nearly as many horses under the hood as . . . well, anything. Still, I get it up to thirty-five. We're on the main road and into thick traffic long before the flashing lights come into view.

"Damn it, Murray! Do you know how much money you just blew us?"

"Sorry, boss," he says. Murray's got a strong, slow accent from the Chimpanzee townships to the south.

"This business is all about reputation! Do you think anyone is going to hire me, hire us, if we can't grease an old bonobo in a diaper?"

"Sorry, boss."

"And Murray, I can't stress this enough. If I'd have killed her, I wouldn't have had to have seen her diaper fall down."

"I won't do it again, boss."

Last week was so much more promising. Gibbons and Bonobos are pretty stuck up about jobs having to do with death. They don't do them. It's beneath them. You can't pay most Gibbons love or money to euthanize the decaying elderly. I was running out

of time on my visa pretty fast and staring at deportation to macaque territory if I didn't find a scam soon. That's when I fell into the euthanasia business. I acquired a failing company from a low status Gibbon with a gambling problem. How hard can euthanasia be? The clients want to die, right?

That business deal got me an extension on my visa. All I had to do was turn a profit and I could do that any time I wanted, just so long as it was within ninety days. Problem was, the bigger whack shops, made up mostly of hulking gorillas, had cornered the euthanasia market. Also, I knew nothing about needles, dosages, or the sterile technique.

That's when I got my great idea. Imagine this ad on late-night TV: "Is your time up? Die with excitement and adventure! Struggle to the very end! Hire an international assassin to finish the job that nature started! If you see it coming, you get your money back!"

It doesn't matter that I'm not really an assassin. Most of business is image and branding, right? I'm exotic. I'm international. That's why Gibbon Immigration wants to deport me back to my shit-hole country where military coups come more often than Christmas.

Gibbon country has great euthanasia laws. They don't specify how it has to be done. And their weapon laws favor the rugged individualist in each of us. There are plenty of places in this town I wouldn't walk without a high-powered rifle and a bulletproof chimpanzee. So International Hit Squad was born. I even got six column-inches on page twelve of the *Gibbontown Shopper*, the third-most-read free paper in the capital, right under the story about the debate on zoning changes. You can't pay for that kind of publicity.

Clients were slower to react than the press corps. It took two weeks for the first one. Unfortunately it was Alexandra, the harpy they use to scare little Bonobo children at night. A bodyguard wheeled the saggy bitch into my office. I'd put on my best business face.

"Fucking macaque!" she said when she saw me. Then she spit on my floor. I shit you not. She spit on my floor. Who spits on a floor?

"How can I help you, ma'am?" I held a clipboard to give myself an air of efficiency.

"Your operation is bullshit!" she yelled. She yelled everything. Her bodyguard, a biggish Bonobo with a heavy pistol on his hip, rolled his eyes.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?" I asked.

"I read your ad," she said. "This is a big scam! You can't deliver shit in a pot, much less give me an exciting death!"

"You'll never know when I strike, ma'am. You'll never see me coming." I smiled my confidence-inspiring, businessman smile.

The bitch spit on my floor again.

"I was a sergeant in the Bonobo Marines!" she said. "I worked close protection for the Bonobo Secret Service and kept a senator alive during the Gibbon invasion. No one can sneak up on me, least of all a goddamn poseur of a macaque!"

I shrugged. "My guarantee is there, ma'am. If you see me coming, you get your money back."

"It's a scam."

"Try me out," I said. "Unless you're yellow."

She slapped her wrinkly hand on the armrest of her wheelchair. She looked like she was having an aneurysm, foaming and sputtering. I didn't want her to die. She hadn't signed the contract yet.

"Bring it on, little man."

My eyes narrowed and I felt my augmented muscles debating whether to choke the bitch right here. Sure, there are lots of smaller primates, and macaques aren't

very big, but everyone, and I mean everyone, knows we hate being called little. Racist bitch. Macaques just have delicate bones.

I snapped a contract onto the clipboard and shoved it at her. "You'll never see me coming, ma'am. Whatever you think you knew way back when has been made obsolete, just like you."

Little veins on her neck thumped under papery, dark skin. White spit collected at the points of her mouth.

She scrawled her name across the bottom of the sheet and threw it back at me.

"It's on!" she yelled.

"Not yet!" I yelled over her.

She'd signed in the wrong spot. As a businessman, I'm a stickler for detail. I handed her a fresh contract and put an X where she had to sign. "Do it right, this time!"

Her long, old fingers flexed and released, like she wanted to slap me. Then she filled out the whole form. Then, she signed in neat little letters and handed it back to me. I looked at it.

Oh shit.

Listed next of kin was the Bonobo ambassador. Address, the ambassador's residence. That place was crawling with security.

She cackled when she saw my expression change. "And I've got augments, little man," she said, pointing at her eyes. "I can see farther than a hawk and I've got nothing to do all day but watch for you." She cackled louder and signaled for her bodyguard to wheel her out.

Damn.

After being chased out of a tree on my first attempt to off the hag, I hire a Gibbon to do some surveillance work. She's an aging street vendor with long arms and pale, thick fur. She trundles a soup cart around, and with my encouragement, sets herself up close to the Bonobo ambassador's official residence. The Bonobos don't go near her, but the Gibbon diplomatic police, tall, black-eyed, with white belts and holsters, take their cigarette breaks beside her cart, nursing cups of soup, and sometimes something harder. Good girl.

At the end of the third day, she tells me that one of the diplomatic cops said that the ambassador's mother is going shopping on Saturday at the crafts market. Sweet. The crafts market has lots of cover and is crawling with Gibbons and foreigners. Murray and I can blend in.

Early on Saturday, Murray, loaded with my gear, follows me in. It rained yesterday and the market stinks of wet fur and fine mud overlaying older paving stones. The stalls, framed in wood, are covered by woven tarps of so many colors that it looks like a rainbow barfed on the whole sprawling hippie-fest. The stalls creak under the worthless weight of woven grass baskets, wooden masks, carved salad spoons, and hemp blankets. Nothing here couldn't have been made better and cheaper by a good, solid, greenhouse-gas-producing machine.

The market had congealed a long time ago around an old cathedral tower. The rest of the cathedral had burnt down or been knocked down or something, but the old tower is still there. I bribe some janitorial type and he lets us in. We wind our way up the damp, rotting stairwell and I set myself up on the fourth floor, where the absent old bell has left a space for a marksman with a rifle to cover most of the place. I leave my dumb-ass sidekick on the landing and he's only too happy to not be involved.

Don't get me wrong. Murray's good at some stuff. I just haven't found what it is yet. He's loyal though, like a stupid dog. If he hadn't married my sister, I would have booted his ass a long time ago.

I can see the parking lot and it doesn't take me long before I see a dark Ford Bron-

co with tinted windows and diplomatic plates driving in. I watch through the scope. I recognize Alexandra's Bonobo bodyguard by the balding head and the long vertical wrinkles around his lips. He and the driver help the witch out and put her into the wheelchair. She looks positively delighted today. Although, to be honest, the Bonobo bitch could have gas for all I can figure out of their expressions sometimes. Still, there's something.

Good day to die, you old hag.

I have a clear shot at any of a dozen positions once she's in the market. I aim my scope down the rows of stalls, looking for where the most surprising shot could happen. Should I shoot her in the head as she's looking at something, or in the chest as she's paying? I want her to know it was me. She paid for surprise. Still, a paycheck is pretty important. This one will put me in the clear for a while, and will sort out my immigration problems.

Lots of customers, even early in the morning. Lots of old Gibbon ladies, but more of the button-down crowd than I expected. Slumming? Faux new-agers? I scan a few through the scope. They're big Gibbons, mostly males, picking at the merchandise. They've got smocks on, the latest Gibbon fashion. These guys all have one hand in their pockets. Cops? Doesn't matter. I'm not doing anything illegal. I've got a license for the rifle. No receipt, but a license. And I've got a contract signed by Miss Bitchy herself to kill her. I'm golden.

One of the Gibbons looks a little familiar. Long black hair, pronounced eye ridges, wrinkled face hanging off the nose ridge, black skin and pinkish lips. Over his forehead is a receding V of baldness. Why does he look familiar?

Fuck.

I've seen him a few times. He's an immigration supervisor. Scanning the market. Now that I look closer, I recognize a few others. All immigration officers. Not mine, but pretty much everyone else. Shit. They're holding passport readers in their pockets and walking through the crowd. The chips in Gibbon ID cards, as well as the smart passports and RFID visas of foreigners, are all automatically checked. I pat my chest pocket. Passport and visa are there. Good. They'll stand a cursory check, but if I get too close . . . not so much.

My visa troubles, as I said, are mostly solved. I didn't say they were solved legitimately. The business visa in my passport isn't exactly mine. Let's leave it at that.

But what the hell is immigration doing here? Lots of foreigners here, for sure, but doesn't immigration have bigger fish to fry? I huddle close to the corner, only the end of my black scope showing above the sill. I scan. I spot the bodyguard pushing the wheelchair of my diapered Bonobo target. Her flabby, drooling mouth is spread into a wide grin.

That bitch!

She set me up.

She tipped off immigration.

I can probably make it out of here without running into them, but she's daring me to put a round between her smug, black eyes and draw attention to myself. The cops will swarm the place. Then I'll show my euthanasia license. Of course, seeing as how I'm a macaque, immigration will want to have a look at me. A close look.

God, I hate old people.

I kick the wall, startling Murray. He sticks out his bearded bottom lip, and his pink ears look even more awkward sticking out of the sides of his head.

"We're heading downstairs, Murray," I whisper. "This place is crawling with immigration."

His big eyebrows rise in alarm. I sorted out his immigration problems, kind of the same way I sorted out mine, but I didn't spend as much money on it. There aren't a lot of immigration officers who'll believe that Murray is a visiting professor of

physics. Don't get me wrong. Some Gibbons are absolutely stupid. I just don't want to bank an operation on Mister Tenure Track here.

"Come on," I say, and lead the way downstairs and out the door. Murray follows, lugging my gear.

I swing him to the left, and spot one of those buttoned-down types at the other corner of the tower. He's scanning the crowd, looking away right now. I pull Murray to the right, almost setting our fur on fire on an open charcoal grill. An old Gibbon lady is making tortillas. Murray squeals. We weave around her. Lots of people around, but I'm starting to think that maybe we stand out a little. Two foreigners carrying non-hippie gear. Yeah, which one of these things doesn't belong in a handicrafts bazaar?

I grab us two Andean-style ponchos at a stall decorated with old, framed lithographs of dragons, rainbows, and unicorns. Murray admires them. I shove the poncho over his head. Watch unicorns on someone else's dime. I pay the Gibbon weaver more than I want to for the ponchos, but we look a lot less conspicuous now.

An immigration guy is sort of standing nonchalantly at the other end of this alley, too. I pull Murray with me between two stalls, shoving past some Gibbons smoking on stools while they weave dream catchers.

"Go back where you came from!" one of them yells after us.

I lick my finger and flip him the bird.

We find a narrow alley, undertrafficked, with lots of puddles. The stalls here are filled with specialty stuff. If you want rings of South German mettwurst or dried Baltic cod with wrinkled eyes, I can now point you here. This alley crosses a couple of busier ones, but immigration seems to be staking out the bigger intersections. Still, I don't let myself react until we're in the Renault, on the road, and in second gear.

That dirty Bonobo bitch!

Two can play with corrupt officials. Now it's really on. It's got to be. I'm down to sixty-two days.

I meet my immigration officer in a small café far from her office. Her name's Khao Yai. She's descended from the Thai Gibbon populations. After one of the many Thai coups, lot of Thai Gibbons moved to these parts. Their exotic gray-white fur and black bellies made them in demand for TV commercials and even acting roles, but if you asked me, that fad wasn't over fast enough. None of them could act worth shit (and we're talking soaps, here) and their accents were pretty thick. Khao Yai was born here and speaks like a native. She leveraged her looks to get a job in the Gibbon Immigration Service. What I like best about her is her pragmatism.

I slide a thickish wad of bills across the table. Low denominations, but it's not like I'm asking to get the ambassador's mother deported. I just want the immigration computer system to mark Alexandra's diplomatic visa as expired.

A diplomatic visa would normally be dealt with on paper by some low-level bureaucrat in the Gibbon Protocol Office, but the Gibbons and Bonobos have been at each other's throats in three separate wars in the last twenty years. You can bet that the Gibbons won't make anything easy for the Bonobo diplomats.

Here's how I figure it'll go down. The old hag has to drive from the official residence to the immigration office. On the way, I put a bullet through the car window, and her head. My client is satisfied with a surprising euthanasia experience. I get my pay, minus the cost of one car window.

I'm a genius.

Khao Yai calls me from her office the next day. She's never called me from her office.

"The date of expiry got changed," she says. "I couldn't access the system with my clearance. I needed to get my supervisor's help. I'll need more money."

Of course she will.

"Fine," I say. "We can work something out, maybe not now, but when I'm a little more flush. When is she coming to your office?"

"That's the thing, Reggie. Protocol Office and Foreign Affairs are tangling their fur over this. They're probably going to send an officer to her."

"Damn it!"

"They asked me a lot of questions about you."

"What?" I ask, feeling my stomach cool. "Who did?"

"Foreign Affairs and my boss."

"Shit. What does that mean?"

"Relax. I didn't tell them anything about your . . . funny status. As far as they're concerned, you're a legit businessman—"

"I am a legit businessman! I have a contract!"

"That's what I told them. They're looking to help out. Apparently, they need to make some sort of gesture of peace-making to the Bonobos. The big bosses at Foreign Affairs are trying to play nice."

"What does this all mean?"

"Can you fax me over your contract?" she asks. "They want proof that you're legitimately authorized to euthanize the old Bonobo."

"Then what?"

"How would you like to get into the Official Residence, as part of the Protocol team going in?"

"Uh . . . everyone knows I'm a macaque, right? I don't look anything like a Gibbon bureaucrat and neither does Murray."

"Are you strong enough to be a porter?" she asks.

"Hell, yeah!" I say, warming up to the possibilities. "I've got some pretty sophisticated myofibril-augments. I can change a tire on my car without a jack."

I don't mention that the car is a Renault 4L, or that I can only do that on the back end, but let's see you lift the back end of a car with one hand.

"What are me and Murray going to have to carry?"

"Foreign Affairs figures they help you get the contract done under the cover of you carrying in something big while they sort out her visa. This makes everyone happy. Apparently the ambassador knows about the contract and hates his mother." There's a surprise. "Fax me the contract in case it's some kind of trick on the part of the Bonobos. Foreign Affairs doesn't want anything to go wrong, Reggie. Nothing will go wrong, will it?"

"No, of course not! I'll fax you the contract right away. Nothing will go wrong." I glare at Murray meaningfully.

"Good."

I hang up. My big, dumb sidekick waits for me to say something.

"Murray, luck is breaking our way. You better not screw this up for us."

Gibbon number one at the Protocol Office (Howard) is one of the elite, white-handed gibbons. He's stuffy. He doesn't look at me twice before taking his perfectly preened, dark and fluffy fur out to the Ministry car that will take him to the Bonobo residence. Gibbon number two (Remi) is friendlier. His cream-colored fur is matted at the waist where a leather belt holds two Blackberries, a cell-phone, and a pack of Marlboros. His black face, surrounded by a halo of white fur, regards me with some boredom.

"You guys going to be able to lift these boxes?" he asks.

Murray keeps his eyes down. I told him again just before getting here that he'd better not fuck this up. The boxes of pristine white cardboard are heavy and big, but we've both got augmented strength. The boxes will make beautiful camouflage.

"No problem."

Remi guides us to a second Ministry car (they get their own) with the boxes.

"So you really got hired to euthanize the ambassador's mother, eh?" Remi asks me.

"I'm the best. When you want to be offed by an international assassin, I'm your guy."

"I'll keep you in mind," he says. "My mother-in-law is getting up there and soon she'll have to come live with us."

"See if she's open to the idea," I say brightly. "Let me know if a talk with one of our sales reps would help."

"Thanks, I will." He takes my card and heads to his own vehicle to join Howard.

"See?" I say to Murray, in the back of the Ministry car they've assigned us. It's got a Gibbon driver up front. "That's what gets us business: personal contact. People are looking for warmth. When are you going to show some warmth and bring us some business?"

Murray looks sheepish, pouting out his lower lip as the two-car convoy pulls into traffic. I sit back, trying to think of all the angles. I've gotta get this one right. Potential clients are going to be watching. I try to think of every way that Murray can screw this up. There are way too many ways, so I try to group them. I give him some last minute instructions as we drive through the gate of the Bonobo Official Residence.

The Protocol Office has duded us out in yellow coveralls, like we're debt-bonded criminals or something. The box I'm carrying has a small flap on one corner, where I can access some heavy statues with a lot of curved and confusing lines that mask the stashed carbon-plastic pistol with a full magazine of ceramic rounds. I get to pull it out when I can find a clear shot. I'm almost giggling inside thinking of how many rounds I put in the old hag's chest and how many I put in her head. She should never have bet against Reggie.

We pull the boxes out of the trunk and bring them to an x-ray scanner. Remi's a real expert at distracting them, and guides the Bonobo diplomatic security into each of the boxes, pointing at all the little moving parts on the sculptures. They are appropriately baffled and they don't find the plastic pistol. We carry the boxes behind Howard and Remi. We go through a big receiving hall with marbled floors and a lot of tropical plants, out to a garden in the back of the house.

An older Bonobo male, lightly furred in black over gray skin, stands by a fountain. A Bonobo waiter in an apron and white shirt stands near him with glasses of scotch and wine on a tray. Alexandra the Bonobo sits in her wheelchair under a tree, in front of her bored bodyguard.

I'm not sure what I expected. I mean, based on half the stories you hear about Bonobos, I'm expecting the ambassador to be rubbing genitals with the waiter, but maybe those are just stories. You've heard the old joke? "What's the difference between Bonobo porn and real life? Nothing." It's an oldie, but a goodie. Unsurprisingly however, the ambassador's mother is complaining loudly about something.

Murray is beside me, blocking the hag's view of me, and most of the attention is on Howard anyway, who is shaking hands and exchanging a lot of fancy, meaningless words with the ambassador. I've got my shot. Goodbye, you racist old bitch.

I slip my hand through the flap and reach for the pistol in the innards of the statue.

It's not there!

I feel frantically in the box and around the statue. I've got a couple of seconds before I'll start looking stupid holding a box in front of my face. Once I put it down, with no gun, the cranky bitch is going to see me. Then, I'll be the laughing stock of the euthanasia profession, before I'll have even killed anyone. The room goes silent.

I sag and put down the box. Murray puts his down.

And there's Remi, pointing the plastic gun at the ambassador, but staring down the Bonobo bodyguard.

Aw, shit. In a second, I can see where all this is going. I'm not just going to lose my reputation and my business and get deported. I'm about to get killed.

The Gibbons and the Bonobos hate each other's guts. The Gibbon Foreign Ministry got wind of my contract and saw their opportunity to kill the ambassador, and blame the hit on a macaque migrant worker. In about ten seconds, everybody in this room is going to be dead except Remi and Howard. The Bonobo investigators will find the gun in my hand.

We're unarmed. I look at Murray for help. The dumb chimp's eyes are wide and he looks like he's going to need a diaper in a second. Good-for-nothing son-of—

I grab my sidekick and throw him at Remi with all my strength.

They fall like coconuts in a hurricane. Howard jumps after them, after my damn gun.

The Bonobo bodyguard whips out his pistol and pumps eighteen rounds into the simian tangle on the floor. With the two rounds left in his chamber, he swings the barrel at me.

I've already got my hands high in the air. I'm a non-combatant.

"I'm not with them!" I say slow and loud. "I kill old people. I'm here to kill her!" I point one finger at the ambassador's mother. "I've got a contract! You saw her sign it!"

"And you haven't been able to get close to me even once, you little macaque failure!" she cackles, standing in her soggy, stained diaper.

Her bodyguard flinches, and then swivels his pistol back at the bullet-ridden bodies of Howard and Remi. Underneath them, Murray sits up, rubbing three vicious welts on his arm where bullets hit him. "Ow!"

A motivational speaker, he ain't.

"He's with me," I say. "He's my employee. We're fully bonded."

The doors to the garden burst open and a bunch of armed Bonobo security guys rush in. Everybody's loud. It takes a while for the Bonobos to take away the two Gibbon corpses and the gun. A few extra security guys stick close to the ambassador.

"Junior, get this little trash out of here!" Alexandra the Bonobo yells. "He's failed again, this time miserably! International assassin, my ass! Pathetic!" she says. "Get me out of here!"

The ambassador has an irritated look on his face as the bodyguard starts wheeling her out. Alexandra turns her nose from me disdainfully.

As she passes, I snake my hands out, one on her chin and the other on the crown of her head. I twist. The snap silences the garden.

Guns whip out again, but I've already got my hands up. Murray ducks to the floor and covers his head.

"I had a contract! She hired me to kill her! I'm a euthanasiast."

I'm not sure if that's even a word, but everyone looks at the ambassador. He and the bodyguard nod.

"I promised her an exciting and surprising death," I say, lowering my arms slowly. "Mission accomplished. She never saw it coming."

It takes a week to sort everything out. The Gibbons don't have their public excuse for a war they want, unless the Bonobos tell everyone what happened, which they don't. For saving the ambassador, Murray gets a reward. I don't know what the hell fight the ambassador was watching. At least Murray shares it with me, seventy-thirty. He uses his thirty percent to have his wife and kids smuggled in from the Chimpanzee townships and I get them some passable documents. Well, yeah. Passable. And I get my fee from finally helping the old bag shuffle off the mortal coil. I'm sure she would have said I didn't do my job the way she wanted it in the contract, but the ambassador must have liked the service. He let slip that he's flying in his mother-in-law from the Bonobo capital for a talk. O

A HUNDRED HUNDRED DAISIES

Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress tells us, "Although I now live in Seattle, I used to live in various cities along the Great Lakes, where the issue in this story is a very real one. I heard a lecturer from the University of Rochester say that 'The next big war will not be fought over oil, but over water.' Because the Great Lakes hold so much of the world's fresh water, people like Danny and Ruthie will be right in the line of fire. This story is less fiction than prophesy." Nancy Kress's most recent novel is *Steal Across the Sky* (Tor). She lives in Seattle with her new husband, writer Jack Skillingsstead. You can follow her blog at nancykress.blogspot.com.

I hear him go out the front door. The wind had stopped, like it always does at sundown, and even though he was moving quiet as a deer, I'd been lying awake for this. My clock says 2:30 A.M. The hot darkness of my bedroom presses all around me. The front door closes and the motion-detector light on the porch comes on. We still have electricity. The light stays on ten full minutes, in case of robbers.

Like we have anything left to steal.

I'm ready. Shoes and jacket on, window open. After supper I took the sensor out of the motion light on the west side of the house. My father doesn't notice. He's headed the other way, toward the road.

Out the window, down the maple tree, around the house. He'd parked the truck way down the road, clear past the onion field. What used to be the onion field. Quietly I pull my bicycle, too old and rusty to sell, out from my mom's lilac hedge. No flowers again this year.

The truck starts, drives away. I pedal along the dark road, losing him at the first rise. It doesn't matter. I know where he's going, where they're all going, where he thought he could go without me. No way. I'm not a child, and this is my future, too.

Somewhere in the roadside scrub a small animal scurries away. An owl hoots. The night, so hot and dry even though it's only May, draws sweat from me, which instantly evaporates off my skin. There are no mosquitoes. I pedal harder.

Allen Corporation has posted a guard at the construction site, where until now

there has been no guard, nor a need for one. Did someone tip them off? Is the law out there, with guns? I've beaten my father to the site, which at first puzzles me, and then doesn't. He would have joined up with the others somewhere, some gathering place to consolidate men and equipment. You couldn't just roar up here in a dozen pick-ups and SUVs, leaving tracks all over the place.

A single floodlight illuminates the guard, throwing a circle of yellow light. He sits in a clear, three-sided shack like the one where my sister Ruthie waits for the school bus with her little friends. I can see him clearly, a young guy, not from here. At least, I don't recognize him. He's got on a blue uniform and he's reading a graphic novel. He lifts a can to his mouth, drinks, goes back to the book.

Is he armed? I can't tell.

A thrill goes through me, starting at my belly and tingling clear up to the top of my head. I can do this. My father and the others will be here soon. I can get this done before they arrive.

"Hey, man!" I call out, and lurch from the darkness. The guard leaps to his feet and pulls something from his pocket. My heart stops. But it's not a gun—too small. It's a cell phone. He's supposed to call somebody else if there's trouble.

"Stop," he says in a surprisingly deep voice.

I stop, pretend to stagger sideways, and then right myself and put on what Ruthie calls my "goofy head"—weird grin, wide eyes. I slur my words. "Can I ha' one o' those beers? You got more? I'm fresh out!"

"You are trespassing on private property. Leave immediately."

"No beer?" I try to sound tragic, like somebody in a play in English class.

"Leave immediately. You are trespassing on private property."

"Okay, okay, sheesh, I'm going already." Now I can make out the huge bulk of the pipeline, twenty feet beyond the guard shack. I stagger again and fall forward, flat on my face, arms extended way forward so he can see that my hands are empty. "Aw, fuck."

The guard says nothing. At the edge of my vision I see him finger the cell. He doesn't want to look like a fool, calling in about one drunken kid, waking up Somebody Important at three in the morning. But he doesn't want to make a mistake, either. I help him decide. I turn my head and puke onto the ground.

This is a thing I learned to do when I was Ruthie's age: vomit at will without sticking a finger down my throat. I practiced and practiced until I could do it anytime I wanted to impress my friends or get out of school. So I lay there hurling my cookies, and I'm not a big guy: five-nine and 145 pounds. Middle-weight wrestling class.

The guard makes a sound of disgust and moves closer. Clearly I'm no threat. "Get out of here, you fag. Now!"

I flail feebly on the ground.

"I said get out!" He yells louder, like that might sober me, and moves in for a kick. When he's close enough, I spring. He's bigger and older, but I was runner-up for state wrestling champion. Before he knows it, I've got him on the ground. Illegal hold, unnecessary roughness, unsportsmanlike conduct: two penalty points.

He shouts something and fights back, even though that increases his pain. I'm not sure I can hold him; he's *strong*. I hear a truck in the distance.

The guy is going to get free.

My father will be here any minute.

Adrenaline surges through me like a tsunami.

The ground is littered with construction-site rubble. I pick up a rock and bash him on the head. He drops like a fifty-pound sack of fertilizer, and that throws me off balance. I go down, too, and my head strikes some random piece of metal. Everything blurs except the thought *Oh God what if I killed the fucker?* When I can see again I

drag myself over to him. Blood on his head, but he's breathing. I've dragged myself through my own vomit. The truck halts.

Men rush forward. My father says, "Danny?"

"Christ, Larry, what is this?" Mr. Swenson, who farms next to us. Used to farm next to us.

I gasp, "Took . . . out guard . . . for you."

"Oh, fuck," somebody else says. And then, "Kid, did he see your face?"

The answer must have been on my own face, because the man snaps, "You couldn't have worn a ski mask?"

"Shut up, Ed," Mr. Swenson says. I can't get out my answer: *I didn't know there'd be a guard!* Someone is bending over the guard, lifting him in a fireman's carry. Someone else is pulling back my eyelids and peering at my eyes—a doctor? Is Dr. Radusky here? No, he wouldn't . . . he can't . . . Things grow fuzzier. I lose a few minutes, but I know I'm not passed out because I'm aware of both my father kneeling beside me and parts of the argument floating above:

"—do it anyway!"

"—Larry's kid screwed us and—"

"We came here to—"

"The law—"

"I'm not leaving until I do what I come for!"

They do it, all of them except Dad. Quick and hard, panting and grunting. The night shrieks with pick-axes, chain saws, welding torches. Someone moves the floodlight pole closer to the pipeline.

The huge pipe, forty-eight inches in diameter and raised above the ground on stanchions to let animals pass underneath, is being wrecked. Only a thirty-foot section of its monstrous and unfinished length, but that's enough. For now. I hear a piece of heavy equipment, dozer or backhoe, start up, move. A moment later, a crash.

More pipe down.

It's over in twenty minutes, during which I vomit once more, this time unwilling. Puking again blurs my vision. When it clears, my father is pulling me to my feet. I stagger against him. Before someone kills the floodlight, I see the Allen Corporation Great Lakes Water Diversion Pipeline lying in jagged pieces. I see dust covering everything to an inch thick and still falling from the sky, like rain. I see the farm the way it was when I was Ruthie's age, the corn green and spiky, Mom's lilacs in bloom, the horse pasture full of wildflowers. I see my dead grandfather driving the combine. I know then that my head hasn't cleared at all, and that I am hallucinating.

But one thing I see with total clarity before I pass out: my father's grim, tight-lipped face as he half-carries me to the pick-up full of men.

The law is at our house by 6:30 A.M.

Before that, Dr. Radusky came by. He made me do various things. "Concussion," he said, "consistent with falling off his bicycle and hitting his head. Keep him awake, walking around as much as you can, and bring him to my office tomorrow for another look-see. No school today or tomorrow, and no wrestling for longer than that." He didn't look at my father, but Dr. Radusky knew, of course. The whole town knew.

"Larry," my mother says in the hallway beyond my bedroom. They're taking turns making sure I sit up, walk around, and don't sleep. "Sheriff is downstairs."

"Uh-huh." My father leaves.

My mother comes into my room and snaps, not for the first time, "What in Christ's name were you thinking?"

I don't answer. If they don't see that I'm a hero, the hell with them.

"I'm going downstairs," she says. "Don't lie down, Danny. Promise me."

I nod sullenly. As soon as she's gone, Ruthie slides in. She's dressed for school in jeans and an old green blouse that used be Mom's. It's been cut down somehow to sort of fit her. "Danny," she whispers, "what did you *do*?"

"Nothing, squirt."

"But everybody's mad at you!"

"I was out riding my bike and fell off it and hit my head. That's all."

"Out riding in the night? Why?"

"You wouldn't understand." My head throbs and aches.

"Were you going to see a girl?"

I wish. "None of your business."

"Was it Jenny Bradford?"

"Beat it, squirt."

"I'm going to go downstairs and listen."

"No, you're not!"

"If I don't, then will you tell me another picture?"

Ruthie scavenges photographs. She ferrets them out of the boxes and envelopes where Mom has shoved them, hidden all over the house because Mom can't bear to look at them anymore. I remember her doing it, crying as she ripped some from their frames—there used to be a lot of framed pictures all over the place—and tossed the silver frames into the box for the pawnshop. Now Ruthie finds them and brings them to me to identify things: *That's Great Uncle Jim in front of the barn we sold to the Allen people; that's Grandpa driving the combine*. She doesn't remember any of it, but I do.

She pulls a picture from under her blouse and holds it out to me. This one is newer than most of her stash, printed on a color printer from somebody's digital camera. I remember that printer. We sold it long ago, with everything else: the antiques handed down from Great-Grandma Ann, the farm equipment, the land. None of it was enough. The house is in foreclosure.

I say, "That's our old horse pasture."

"We had horses?"

"One horse." White Foot. He'd been mine.

"Where's the horse?"

"Gone."

"Where's the pasture? Is it the dirt field over by the falling-down fence?"

"Yeah."

"But what are those?" She points at the photograph.

In the picture the pasture, its fences whole and whitewashed, is full of wildflowers, mostly daisies. Wave after wave of daisies in semi-close-up, their centers bright yellow like little suns, their petals almost too white, maybe from some trick of the camera. When was the last time I saw a daisy? Had Ruthie ever seen one?

I say, "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"You just said bad words!"

"They're called 'daisies.' Now go away, brat."

"You said bad words! I'm telling!"

Heavy footsteps on the stairs. Ruthie, looking close to tears, thrusts the photo under her blouse and skitters out the door. It isn't the tears that do me in, it's the blouse.

My parents come in, with Sheriff Buchmann. The room is too full. I know from her face that Mom hates Buchmann seeing my patched bedspread, faded curtains, sparse furniture. Me, I just hate the sheriff.

He says, "Daniel, did you go last night to the site of the Allen Corporation's pipeline?"

"No, sir."

"How'd you get that bandage on your head?"

"Tripped in the dark and fell off my bike."

"Where?"

"Corner of Maple and Grey."

"And what were you doing down there?"

"I had a fight with my father and wanted to get away."

"What was the fight about?"

"My grades. My teacher called yesterday. My math grade sucks." Could Buchmann tell I'd been rehearsed? He'd check, but Mr. Ruhl did call yesterday, and my math grade does suck. My parents gaze at me steadily, without emotion. They're good at that. So is Buchmann. I want to ask if the pipeline guard is okay, but I can't. I wasn't there. It never happened. Unless the guard can I.D. me.

I gaze back, emotionless, my father's son.

Ruthie is drawing daisies. I don't know where she got the paper. Her crayons are only what's been hoarded for years, now stubby lengths of yellow and green laid carefully on the kitchen table. So far she's covered three sheets of thin paper with eight daisies each, every flower in its own little box. They have yellow centers, green leaves, and petals that are the white of the paper outlined in green.

"Hi, Danny! Is your head better?"

"Yeah. What are these?"

"Daisies, stupid."

"I mean, why are you making them?"

"I want to." She looks up at me, crayon stub in her fist, her face all serious. "Do you know what my teacher taught us in school today?"

"How would I know? I'm not in the second grade." Unlike me, Ruthie likes school and is good at it.

"She taught us about the pipeline. Some people broke it Monday night."

My hand stops halfway to the fridge handle, starts again, opens the fridge door. Nothing to eat but bread, leftover potatoes, drippings, early strawberries Mom picked today. She will be saving those.

Ruthie says, "The pipeline people are fixing it. It's supposed to carry water to 'The Southwest.'" She says the words carefully, like she might say "Narnia" or "Middle Earth."

"Is that so," I say. I take bread and drippings from the fridge.

"Yes. The water will come from 'Lake Michigan.' That's one of the Great Lakes."

"Yeah, I know."

"There are five Great Lakes, and they have four-fifths of the fresh water in the world. That means that if you put all the fresh water in the world into five humongous pots, then four—"

I stop listening to her math lesson. The guard couldn't I.D. me. I watched him on TV—we still have a TV, so old that nobody wants it, but no LinkNet for any good programs. The guard looked even younger than I remembered, no more than a few years older than me. He also looked more scared than I remembered. I spread drippings on my bread.

Ruthie is still reciting. "The water is supposed to go to farms around the 'Great Lakes Basin,' but it's not. It's going to go through the big pipe to 'The Southwest.' Danny, why can't we have some of that water to make our farm grow again?"

"Bingo."

"Answer me!" Ruthie says, sounding just like Mom.

"Because the Southwest can pay for it and we can't."

Ruthie nods solemnly. "I know. We can't pay for anything. That's why we have to move. I don't wanna move. Danny—where will we go?"

"I don't know, squirt." I no longer want my bread and drippings. And I don't want to talk about this with Ruthie. It fills me with too much rage. I put the half-eaten bread in the fridge and go upstairs.

The next night, the pipeline is attacked in Fuller Corners, twenty miles to the south. There were two guards, both armed. One is killed.

"Daniel Raymond Hitchens, you are under arrest for destruction of property, trespass, and assault in the first degree. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in court. You have the right to an attorney—"

The two cops, neither from here, have come right into math class during final exams. They cuff me and lead me out, my test paper left on my desk, half the equations probably wrong. My classmates gape; Connie Moorhouse starts to cry. Mr. Ruhl says feebly, "See here, now, you can't—" He shuts up. Clearly they can.

Outside the classroom they frisk me. I bluster, "Aren't I supposed to get one phone call?"

"You got a phone?"

I don't, of course—gone long ago.

"You get your call at the station."

They take me to the police station in Fuller Corners. There is a lot of talking, video recording, paperwork. I learn that I am suspected of killing the guard in the Fuller Corners attack. The surviving guard identified me. This is ridiculous; I have never even been to Fuller Corners. That doesn't stop me from being scared. I know that something more is going on here, but I don't know what. When I get my phone call to my father, I am almost blubbering, which makes me furious.

My parents come roaring down to Fuller Corners like hounds on a deer. Along with them come more TV cameras than I can count. More shouting. A lawyer. I can't be arraigned until tomorrow. What is arraigned? It doesn't sound good. I spend the night in the Fuller Corners lock-up because I'm seventeen, not sixteen. The jail has two cells. One holds a man accused of raping his wife. The other has me and a drunk who snores, sprawling across the bottom bunk and smelling of booze and piss. He never wakes the entire time I'm there.

Dad drives me home after the arraignment. I am out on bail. More TV cameras, even a robocam. I recognize Elizabeth Wilkins, talking into a microphone on the courthouse steps. She looks hot. Everyone follows my every move, but in the truck it's just my father and me, and he doesn't look at me.

He doesn't say anything, either.

We drive through the ruined land, field after field empty of all but blowing dust. The thing that gets me is how fast it happened. We learned in school about the possible desertification of the Midwest from global warming. But it was only one possibility, and it was supposed to take decades, maybe longer. Then some temperature drop somewhere in the Pacific Ocean—the *Pacific Ocean*, for fuck's sake—changed some ocean currents, and that brought years of drought, ending in dust that blew around from dawn to sundown. Ending in grass fires and foreclosures and food shortages. Ending in Fuller Corners.

Finally my father says, "This is just the beginning." He keeps his eyes on the road. "But not for you, Danny. You're not going to prison. If that's what you're thinking, get it out of your mind right now. Not going to happen. They got nothing but made-up evidence that won't hold up."

"Then why was I arrested?"

"PR. Yeah, you're the poster boy for this. Bastards."

On the courthouse steps, Elizabeth Wilkins said into her microphone, "The protestors are even using their children in a shameful and selfish fight to stop the pipeline that will save so many lives in the parched and dying cities of Tucson and—"

I am not a child.

"Dad," I blurt out, "were you at Fuller Corners?"

His eyes never leave the road, his expression never changes, he says nothing. Which is all the answer I need.

I thought I knew fear before. I was wrong.

At home, Mom is frying potatoes for dinner. It's warm outside but all the windows are shut against the dust, and all the curtains are drawn tight against everything else. Ruthie lies on the kitchen floor, frantically coloring. I go upstairs and sit on the edge of my bed.

A few minutes later Ruthie comes into my room. She plants herself in front of me, short legs braced apart, hands clasped tight in front of her. "You were in jail."

"I don't want to talk about it. Go away, squirt."

"I can't," she says, and the odd words plus something in her voice make me focus on her. When she was littler, she used to go stand on her head in the pantry and cry whenever anyone wouldn't tell her something she wanted to know.

"Danny, did you break the pipe?"

"No," I say, truthfully.

"Are more people going to break the pipe more?"

"Yes, I think so." *Just the beginning.*

"An 'eviction notice' came today while you were in jail. Does that mean we have to move right away?"

"I don't know." Is the timing of the eviction notice with my faked-up poster-boy arrest just coincidental? How would I even know? The people building the pipeline, which is going to be immensely profitable, are very determined. But so is my father.

Ruthie says, "Where will we go?"

"I don't know that, either." The Midwest is a dust plain, the Southwest desperate for water, the Great Lakes states and Northeast defending their great treasures, the lakes and the Saint Lawrence Seaway. Oregon and Washington have closed their borders, with guns. The South is already too full of refugees without jobs or hope.

Ruthie says, "I think we should go to Middle Earth. They have lots of water."

She doesn't really believe it; she's too old. But she can still dream it aloud. Then, however, she follows it with something else.

"It will be a war, won't it, Danny? Like in history."

"Go downstairs," I say harshly. "I hear Mom calling you to set the table."

She knows I'm lying, but she goes.

I go into the bathroom and turn on the sink. Water flows, brown and sputtery sometimes, but there. We have a pretty deep well, which is the only reason we're still here, the only reason we have electricity and potatoes and bread and, sometimes, coffee. I've caught Mom filling dozens of plastic gallon bottles from the kitchen tap. Even our small town, smaller now that so many have been forced out, has a black market.

I turn off the tap. The well won't hold much longer. The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact won't hold, either. Lake levels have been falling for over a decade. There isn't enough, won't be enough, can't be enough for everybody.

I go down to dinner.

* * *

Exhausted from two nights of sleeplessness and two days of fitful naps, I nonetheless cannot sleep. At 2:00 A.M. I go downstairs and turn on the TV. Without LinkNet, we get only two stations, both a little fuzzy. One of them is all news all the time. With the sound as low as possible, I watch myself being led from the jail to the courthouse, from the courthouse to our truck. I watch film clips of the dead guard. I watch an interview with the guard I clobbered with a rock. He describes his "assailant" as six feet tall, strongly built, around twenty-one years old. Either he has the worst eyesight in the county or else he can't admit he was brought down by a high-school kid who can't do algebra.

Not that I'm going to need algebra in what my future is becoming.

When I can't watch any more, I go into the kitchen. I gather up what I find there, rummage for a pair of scissors, and go outside. There is no wind. Dad's emergency light, battery-run and powerful enough to illuminate the entire inside of the barn we no longer own, is in the shed. When I've finished what I set out to do, I return to the house.

Ruthie is deeply asleep. She stirs when I hoist her onto my shoulder, protests a bit, then slumps against me. When I carry her outside, she wakes fully, a little scared but now also interested.

"Where we going, Danny?"

"You'll see. It's a surprise."

I'm forced to continue to carry her because I forgot her shoes. She grows really heavy but I keep on, stumbling through the dawn. At the old horse pasture I set her on a section of fence that hasn't fallen down yet. I turn on the emergency light and sweep it over the pasture.

"Oh!" Ruthie cries. "Oh, Danny!"

The flowers are scattered all across the bare field, each now on its own little square of paper: yellow centers, white petals outlined in yellow, green leaves until the green crayon was all used up and she had to switch to blue.

"Oh, Danny!" she cries again. "Oh, look! A hundred hundred daisies!"

It will be a war, won't it? Yes. But not this morning.

The sun rises, the wind starts, and the paper daisies swirl upward with the dust. ○

Vampire Politics



Vampires are usually rich
Having such low food and housing costs

And are accordingly opposed
To increases on the income tax

The blood I suck is mine
Say the vampires

Why should the government feel free
To steal from me?

—Ruth Berman

Kij Johnson, who has won the World Fantasy, Nebula, and *Asimov's Readers' Award* for her short fiction, currently has a short story on the Hugo Awards' ballot and a different one is a finalist for the Locus Award. At the moment, Kij is a graduate student at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. With her latest tale, she departs from her traditional short story length to pen a captivating novella about a dangerous alien planet and the humans who attempt to tame it.

THE MAN WHO BRIDGED THE MIST

Kij Johnson

Kit came to Nearside with two trunks and an oiled-cloth folio full of plans for the bridge across the mist. His trunks lay tumbled like stones at his feet, where the mailcoach guard had dropped them. The folio he held close, away from the drying mud of yesterday's storm.

Nearside was small, especially to a man of the capital, where buildings towered seven and eight stories tall, a city so large that even a vigorous walker could not cross it in half a day. Here hard-packed dirt roads threaded through irregular spaces scattered with structures and fences. Even the inn was plain, two stories of golden limestone and blue slate tiles, with (he could smell) some sort of animals living behind it. On the sign overhead, a flat, pale blue fish very like a ray curved against a black background.

A brightly dressed woman stood by the inn's door. Her skin and eyes were pale, almost colorless. "Excuse me," Kit said. "Where can I find the ferry to take me across the mist?" He could feel himself being weighed, but amiably: a stranger, small and very dark, in gray—a man from the east.

The woman smiled. "Well, the ferries are both at the upper dock. But I expect what you really want is someone to oar the ferry, yes? Rasali Ferry came over from Farside last night. She's the one you'll want to talk to. She spends a lot of time at The Deer's Heart. But you wouldn't like The Heart, sir," she added. "It's not nearly as nice as The Fish here. Are you looking for a room?"

"I'll be staying in Farside tonight," Kit said apologetically. He didn't want to seem arrogant. The invisible web of connections he would need for his work started here, with this first impression, with all the first impressions of the next few days.

"That's what you think," the woman said. "I'm guessing it'll be a day or two, or more, before Rasali goes back. Valo Ferry might, but he doesn't cross so often."

"I could buy out the trip's fares, if that's why she's waiting."

"It's not that," the woman said. "She won't cross the mist 'til she's ready. Until it tells her she can go, if you follow me. But you can ask, I suppose."

Kit didn't follow, but he nodded anyway. "Where's The Deer's Heart?"

She pointed. "Left, then right, then down by the little boat yard."

"Thank you," Kit said. "May I leave my trunks here until I work things out with her?"

"We always stow for travelers." The woman grinned. "And cater to them, too, when they find out there's no way across the mist today."

The Deer's Heart was smaller than The Fish, and livelier. At midday the oak-shaded tables in the beer garden beside the inn were clustered with light-skinned people in brilliant clothes, drinking and tossing comments over the low fence into the boat yard next door, where, half lost in steam, a youth and two women bent planks to form the hull of a small flat-bellied boat. When Kit spoke to a man carrying two mugs of something that looked like mud and smelled of yeast, the man gestured at the yard with his chin. "Ferrys are over there. Rasali's the one in red," he said as he walked away.

"The one in red" was tall, her skin as pale as that of the rest of the locals, with a black braid so long that she had looped it around her neck to keep it out of the way. Her shoulders flexed in the sunlight as she and the youth forced a curved plank to take the skeletal hull's shape. The other woman, slightly shorter, with the ash-blond hair so common here, forced an augur through the plank and into a rib, then hammered a peg into the hole she'd made. After three pegs, the boatwrights straightened. The plank held. *Strong*, Kit thought; *I wonder if I can get them for the bridge?*

"Rasali!" a voice bellowed, almost in Kit's ear. "Man here's looking for you." Kit turned in time to see the man with the mugs gesturing, again with his chin. He sighed and walked to the waist-high fence. The boatwrights stopped to drink from blueware bowls before the one in red and the youth came over.

"I'm Rasali Ferry of Farside," the woman said. Her voice was softer and higher than he had expected of a woman as strong as she, with the fluid vowels of the local accent. She nodded to the boy beside her: "Valo Ferry of Farside, my brother's eldest." Valo was more a young man than a boy, lighter-haired than Rasali and slightly taller. They had the same heavy eyebrows and direct amber eyes.

"Kit Meinem of Atyar," Kit said.

Valo asked, "What sort of name is Meinem? It doesn't mean anything."

"In the capital, we take our names differently than you."

"Oh, like Jenner Ellar." Valo nodded. "I guessed you were from the capital—your clothes and your skin."

Rasali said, "What can we do for you, Kit Meinem of Atyar?"

"I need to get to Farside today," Kit said.

Rasali shook her head. "I can't take you. I just got here, and it's too soon. Perhaps Valo?"

The youth tipped his head to one side, his expression suddenly abstract, as though he were listening to something too faint to hear clearly. He shook his head. "No, not today."

"I can buy out the fares, if that helps. It's Jenner Ellar I am here to see."

Valo looked interested but said, "No," to Rasali, and she added, "What's so important that it can't wait a few days?"

Better now than later, Kit thought. "I am replacing Teniant Planner as the lead engineer and architect for construction of the bridge over the mist. We will start work again as soon as I've reviewed everything. And had a chance to talk to Jenner." He watched their faces.

Rasali said, "It's been a year since Teniant died—I was starting to think Empire had forgotten all about us, and your deliveries would be here 'til the iron rusted away."

"Jenner Ellar's not taking over?" Valo asked, frowning.

"The new Department of Roads cartel is in my name," Kit said. "but I hope Jenner will remain as my second. You can see why I would like to meet him as soon as is possible, of course. He will—"

Valo burst out, "You're going to take over from Jenner, after he's worked so hard on this? And what about us? What about *our* work?" His cheeks were flushed an angry red. *How do they conceal anything with skin like that?* Kit thought.

"Valo," Rasali said, a warning tone in her voice. Flushing darker still, the youth turned and strode away. Rasali snorted but said only: "Boys. He likes Jenner, and he has issues about the bridge, anyway."

That was worth addressing. *Later.* "So, what will it take to get you to carry me across the mist, Rasali Ferry of Farside? The project will pay anything reasonable."

"I cannot," she said. "Not today, not tomorrow. You'll have to wait."

"Why?" Kit asked: reasonably enough, he thought, but she eyed him for a long moment, as if deciding whether to be annoyed.

"Have you gone across mist before?" she said at last.

"Of course."

"Not the river," she said.

"Not the river," he agreed. "It's a quarter mile across here, yes?"

"Oh, yes." She smiled suddenly: white even teeth and warmth like sunlight in her eyes. "Let's go down, and perhaps I can explain things better there." She jumped the fence with a single powerful motion, landing beside him to a chorus of cheers and shouts from the inn garden's patrons. She made an exaggerated bow, then gestured to Kit to follow her. She was well-liked, clearly. Her opinion would matter.

The boat yard was heavily shaded by low-hanging oaks and chestnuts, and bounded on the east by an open-walled shelter filled with barrels and stacks of lumber. Rasali waved at the third boat maker, who was still putting her tools away. "Tilisk Boatwright of Nearside. My brother's wife," she said to Kit. "She makes skiffs with us, but she won't ferry. She's not born to it as Valo and I are."

"Where's your brother?" Kit asked.

"Dead," Rasali said, and lengthened her stride.

They walked a few streets over and then climbed a long, even ridge perhaps eighty feet high, too regular to be natural. A *levee*, Kit thought, and distracted himself from the steep path by estimating the volume of earth and the labor that had been required to build it. Decades, perhaps, but how long ago? How long was it? The levee was treeless. The only feature was a slender wood tower hung with flags. It was probably for signaling across the mist to Farside, since it appeared too fragile for anything else. They had storms out here, Kit knew; there'd been one the night before, which had left the path muddy. How often was the tower struck by lightning?

Rasali stopped. "There."

Kit had been watching his feet. He looked up and nearly cried out as light lanced his suddenly tearing eyes. He fell back a step and shielded his face. What had blinded him was an immense band of white mist reflecting the morning sun.

Kit had never seen the mist river itself, though he'd bridged mist before this, two simple post-and-beam structures over gorges closer to the capital. From his work in Atyar, he knew what was to be known. It was not water, or anything like. It did not flow, but formed somehow in the deep gorge of the great riverbed before him. It found its way many hundreds of miles north, up through a hundred narrowing mist creeks and streams before failing at last, in shreds of drying foam that left bare patches of earth where they collected.

The mist stretched to the south as well, a deepening, thickening band that poured out at last from the river's mouth two thousand miles south, and formed the mist ocean, which lay on the face of the salt-water ocean. Water had to follow the river's bed to run somewhere beneath, or through, the mist, but there was no way to prove this.

There was mist nowhere but this river and its streams and sea; but the mist split Empire in half.

After a moment, the pain in Kit's eyes grew less, and he opened them again. The river was a quarter-mile across where they stood, a great gash of light between the levees. It seemed nearly featureless, blazing under the sun like a river of cream or of bleached silk, but as his eyes accustomed themselves, he saw the surface was not smooth but heaped and hollowed, and that it shifted slowly, almost indiscernibly, as he watched.

Rasali stepped forward, and Kit started. "I'm sorry," he said with a laugh. "How long have I been staring? It's just—I had no idea."

"No one does," Rasali said. Her eyes when he met them were amused.

The east and west levees were nearly identical, each treeless and scrub-covered, with a signal tower. The levee on their side ran down to a narrow bare bank half a dozen yards wide. There was a wooden dock and a boat ramp, a rough switchback leading down to them. Two large boats had been pulled onto the bank. Another, smaller dock was visible a hundred yards upstream, attended by a clutter of boats, sheds, and indeterminate piles covered in tarps.

"Let's go down," Rasali led the way, her words coming back to him over her shoulder. "The little ferry is Valo's. *Pearlfinder*. The *Tranquil Crossing*'s mine." Her voice warmed when she said the name. "Eighteen feet long, eight wide. Mostly pine, but a purpleheart keel and pearwood headpiece. You can't see it from here, but the hull's sheathed in blue-dyed fish-skin. I can carry three horses or a ton and a half of cartage or fifteen passengers. Or various combinations. I once carried twenty-four hunting dogs and two handlers. Never again."

A steady, light breeze eased down from the north, channeled by the levees. The air had a smell, not unpleasant but a little sour, wild. "How can you manage a boat like this alone? Are you that strong?"

"It's as big as I can handle," she said, "but Valo helps sometimes, for really unwieldy loads. You don't paddle through mist. I mostly just coax the *Crossing* to where I want it to go. Anyway, the bigger the boat, the more likely that the Big Ones will notice it; though if you *do* run into a fish, the smaller the boat, the easier it is to swamp. Here we are."

They stood on the bank. The mist streams he had bridged had not prepared him for anything like this. Those were tidy little flows, more like fog collecting in hollows than this. From their angle, the river no longer seemed a smooth flow of creamy whiteness, nor even gently heaped clouds. The mist forced itself into hillocks and hollows, tight slopes perhaps twenty feet high that folded into one another. It had a surface, but it was irregular, cracked in places, translucent in others. The surface didn't seem as clearly defined as that between water and air.

"How can you move on this?" Kit said, fascinated. "Or even float?" The hillock immediately before them was flattening as he watched. Beyond it something like a vale stretched out for a few dozen yards before turning and becoming lost to his eyes.

"Well, I can't, not today," Rasali said. She sat on the gunwale of her boat, one leg swinging, watching him. "I can't push the *Crossing* up those slopes or find a safe path, unless the mist shows me the way. If I went today, I know—I *know*—" she tapped her belly—"that I would find myself stranded on a pinnacle or lost in a hole. *That's* why I can't take you today, Kit Meinem of Atyar."

When Kit was a child, he had not been good with other people. He was small and easy to tease or ignore, and then he was sick for much of his seventh year and had to leave his crèche before the usual time, to convalesce in his mother's house. None of the children of the crèche came to visit him, but he didn't mind that: he had books and puzzles, and whole quires of blank paper that his mother didn't mind him defacing.

The clock in the room in which he slept didn't work, so one day he used his penknife to take it apart. He arranged the wheels and cogs and springs in neat rows on the quilt in his room, by type and then by size; by materials; by weight; by shape. He liked holding the tiny pieces, thinking of how they might have been formed and how they worked together. The patterns they made were interesting, but he knew the best pattern would be the working one, when they were all put back into their right places and the clock performed its task again. He had to think that the clock would be happier that way, too.

He tried to rebuild the clock before his mother came upstairs from her counting house at the end of the day, but when he had reassembled things, there remained a pile of unused parts and it still didn't work; so he shut the clock up and hoped she wouldn't notice that it wasn't ticking. Four days more of trying things during the day and concealing his failures at night; and on the fifth day, the clock started again. One piece hadn't fit anywhere, a small brass cog. Kit still carried that cog in his pen case.

Late that afternoon, Kit returned to the river's edge. It was hotter; the mud had dried to cracked dust, and the air smelled like old rags left in water too long. He saw no one at the ferry dock, but at the fisher's dock upstream people were gathering, a score or more of men and women, with children running about.

The clutter looked even more disorganized as he approached. The fishing boats were fat little coracles of leather stretched on frames, tipped bottom up to the sun and looking like giant warts. The mist had dropped so that he could see a band of exposed rock below the bank. The dock's pilings were clearly visible, which were not vertical but set at an angle: a cantilevered deck braced into the stone underlying the bank. The wooden pilings had been sheathed in metal.

He approached a silver-haired woman doing something with a treble hook as long as her hand. "What are you catching with that?" he said.

Her forehead was wrinkled when she looked up, but she smiled when she saw him. "Oh, you're a stranger. From Atyar, dressed like that. Am I right? We catch fish . . ." Still holding the hook, she extended her arms as far as they would stretch. "Bigger than that, some of them. Looks like more storms, so they're going to be biting tonight. I'm Meg Threehooks. Of Nearside, obviously."

"Kit Meinem of Atyar. I take it you can't find a bottom?" He pointed to the pilings.

Jen Threehooks followed his glance. "It's there somewhere, but it's a long way down, and we can't sink pilings because the mist dissolves the wood. Oh, and fish eat it. Same thing with our ropes, the boats, us—anything but metal and rock, really." She knotted a line around the hook eye. The cord was dark and didn't look heavy enough for anything Kit could imagine catching on hooks that size.

"What are these made of, then?" He squatted to look at the framing under one of the coracles.

"Careful, that one's mine," Meg said. "The hides—well, and all the ropes—are fish-skin. Mist fish, not water fish. Tanning takes off some of the slime, so they don't last forever either, not if they're immersed." She made a face. "We have a saying: foul as fish-slime. That's pretty nasty, you'll see."

"I need to get to Farside," Kit said. "Could I hire you to carry me across?"

"In my boat?" She snorted. "No, fishers stay close to shore. Go see Rasali Ferry. Or Valo."

"I saw her," he said ruefully.

"Thought so. You must be the new architect—city folk are always so impatient. You're so eager to be dinner for a Big One? If Rasali doesn't want to go, then don't go, stands to reason."

Kit was footsore and frustrated by the time he returned to The Fish. His trunks were already upstairs, in a small cheerful room overwhelmed by a table that nearly filled it, with a stiflingly hot cupboard bed. When Kit spoke to the woman he'd talked to earlier, Brana Keep, the owner of The Fish (its real name turned out to be The Big One's Delight)—laughed. "Rasali's as hard to shift as bedrock," she said. "And, truly, you would not be comfortable at The Heart."

By the next morning, when Kit came downstairs to break his fast on flatbread and pepper-rubbed fish, everyone appeared to know everything about him, especially his task. He had wondered whether there would be resistance to the project, but if there had been any, it was gone now. There were a few complaints, mostly about slow payments, a universal issue for public works; but none at all about the labor or organization. Most in the taproom seemed not to mind the bridge, and the feeling everywhere he went in town was optimistic. He'd run into more resistance elsewhere, building the small bridges.

"Well, why should we be concerned?" Brana Keep said to Kit. "You're bringing in people to work, yes? So we'll be selling room and board and clothes and beer to them. And you'll be hiring some of us, and everyone will do well while you're building this bridge of yours. I plan to be wading ankle-deep through gold by the time this is done."

"And after," Kit said, "when the bridge is complete—think of it, the first real link between the east and west sides of Empire. The only place for three thousand miles where people and trade can cross the mist easily, safely, whenever they wish. You'll be the heart of Empire in ten years. Five." He laughed a little, embarrassed by the passion that shook his voice.

"Yes, well," Brana Keep said, in the easy way of a woman who makes her living by not antagonizing customers, "we'll make that harness when the colt is born."

For the next six days, Kit explored the town and surrounding countryside.

He met the masons, a brother and sister that Teniant had selected before her death to oversee the pillar and anchorage construction on Nearsides. They were quiet but competent, and Kit was comfortable not replacing them.

Kit also spoke with the Nearsides rope-makers, and performed tests on their fish-skin ropes and cables, which turned out even stronger than he had hoped, with excellent resistance to rot, and catastrophic and slow failure. The makers told him that the rope stretched for its first two years in use, which made it ineligible to replace the immense chains that would bear the bridge's weight; but it could replace the thousands of vertical suspender chains that would support the roadbed, with a great saving in weight.

He spent much of his time watching the mist. It changed character unpredictably: a smooth rippled flow; hours later, a badland of shredding foam; still later, a field of steep dunes that joined and shifted as he watched. There was nothing level about the mist's surface, but he thought that the river generally dropped in its bed each day under the sun, and rose after dark.

The winds were more predictable. Hedged between the levees, they streamed southward each morning and north each evening, growing stronger toward midday and dusk, and falling away entirely in the afternoons and at night. They did not seem to affect the mist much, though they did tear shreds off that landed on the banks as dried foam.

The winds meant that there would be more dynamic load on the bridge than Teniant

Planner had predicted. Kit would never criticize her work publicly and he gladly acknowledged her brilliant interpersonal skills, which had brought the town into cheerful collaboration, but he was grateful that her bridge had not been built as designed.

He examined the mist more closely, as well, by lifting a piece from the river's surface on the end of an oar. The mist was stiffer than it looked, and in bright light he thought he could see tiny shapes, perhaps creatures or plants or something altogether different. There were microscopes in the city, and people who studied these things; but he had never bothered to learn more, interested only in the structure that would bridge it. In any case, living things interested him less than structures.

Nights, Kit worked on the table in his room. Tenant's plans had to be revised. He opened the folios and cases she had left behind and read everything he found there. He wrote letters, wrote lists, wrote schedules, made duplicates of everything, sent to the capital for someone to do all the subsequent copying. His new plans for the bridge began to take shape, and he started to glimpse the invisible architecture that was the management of the vast project.

He did not see Rasali Ferry, except to ask each morning whether they might travel that day. The answer was always no.

One afternoon, when the clouds were heaping into anvils filled with rain, he walked up to the building site half a mile north of Nearside. For two years, off and on, carts had tracked south on the Hoic Mine road and the West River Road, leaving limestone blocks and iron bars in untidy heaps. Huge dismantled shear-legs lay beside a caretaker's wattle-and-daub hut. There were thousands of large rectangular blocks.

Kit examined some of the blocks. Limestone was often too chossy for large-scale construction, but this rock was sound, with no apparent flaws or fractures. There were not enough, of course, but undoubtedly more had been quarried. He had written to order resumption of deliveries, and they would start arriving soon.

Delivered years too early, the iron trusses that would eventually support the roadbed were stacked neatly, painted black to protect them from moisture, covered in oiled tarps, and raised from the ground on planks. Sheep grazed the knee-high grass that grew everywhere. When one of the sheep eyed him incuriously, Kit found himself bowing. "Forgive the intrusion, sir," he said and laughed: too old to be talking to sheep.

The test pit was still open, a ladder on the ground nearby. Weeds clung when he moved the ladder as if reluctant to release it. He descended.

The pasture had not been noisy, but he was startled when he dropped below ground level and the insects and whispering grasses were suddenly silenced. The soil around him was striated shades of dun and dull yellow. Halfway down, he sliced a wedge free with his knife: lots of clay; good foundation soil, as he had been informed. The pit's bottom, some twenty feet down, looked like the walls, but crouching to dig at the dirt between his feet with his knife, he hit rock almost immediately. It seemed to be shale. He wondered how far down the water table was: did the Nearsiders find it difficult to dig wells? Did the mist ever backwash into one? There were people at University in Atyar who were trying to understand mist, but there was still so much that could not be examined or quantified.

He collected a rock to look at in better light, and climbed from the pit in time to see a teamster leading four mules, her wagon groaning under the weight of the first new blocks. A handful of Nearsider men and women followed, rolling their shoulders and popping their joints. They called out greetings, and he walked across to them.

When he got back to The Fish hours later, exhausted from helping unload the cart and soaked from the storm that had started while he did so, there was a message from Rasali. *Dusk* was all it said.

* * *

Kit was stiff and irritable when he left for the *Tranquil Crossing*. He had hired a carrier from The Fish to haul one of his trunks down to the dock, but the others remained in his room, which he would probably keep until the bridge was done. He carried his folio of plans and paperwork himself. He was leaving duplicates of everything on Near-side, but after so much work, it was hard to trust any of it to the hands of others.

The storm was over and the clouds were moving past, leaving the sky every shade between lavender and a rich purple-blue. The large moon was a crescent in the west; the smaller a half circle immediately overhead. In the fading light, the mist was a dark, smoky streak. The air smelled fresh. Kit's mood lightened, and he half-trotted down the final path.

His fellow passengers were there before him: a prosperous-looking man with a litter of piglets in a woven wicker cage (Tengon whites, the man confided, the best bloodline in all Empire); a woman in the dark clothes fashionable in the capital, with brass-bound document cases and a folio very like Kit's; two traders with many cartons of powdered pigment; a mail courier with locked leather satchels and two guards. Nervous about their first crossing, Uni and Tom Mason greeted Kit when he arrived.

In the gathering darkness, the mist looked like bristling, tight-folded hills and coulees. Swifts darted just above it, using the wind flowing up the valley, searching for insects, he supposed. Once a sudden black shape, too quick to see clearly, appeared from below; then it, and one of the birds, was gone.

The voices of the fishers at their dock carried to him. They launched their boats, and he watched one, and then another, and then a gaggle of the little coracles push themselves up a slope of the mist. There were no lamps.

"Ready, everyone?" Kit had not heard Rasali approach. She swung down into the ferry. "Hand me your gear."

Stowing and embarkation were quick, though the piglets complained. Kit strained his eyes, but the coracles could no longer be seen. When he noticed Rasali waiting for him, he apologized. "I guess the fish are biting."

Rasali glanced at the river as she stowed his trunk. "Small ones. A couple of feet long only. The fishers like them bigger, five or six feet, though they don't want them too big, either. But they're not fish, not what you think fish are. Hand me that."

He hesitated a moment, then gave her the folio before stepping into the ferry. The boat sidled at his weight, but sluggishly: a carthorse instead of a riding mare. His stomach lurched. "Oh!" he said.

"What?" one of the traders asked nervously. Rasali untied the rope holding them to the dock.

Kit swallowed. "I had forgotten. The motion of the boat. It's not like water at all."

He did not mention his fear, but there was no need. The others murmured assent. The courier, her dark face sharp-edged as a hawk, growled, "Every time I do this, it surprises me. I dislike it."

Rasali unshipped a scull and slid the great triangular blade into the mist, which parted reluctantly. "I've been on mist more than water, but I remember the way water felt. Quick and jittery. This is better."

"Only to you, Rasali Ferry," Uni Mason said.

"Water's safer," the man with the piglets said.

Rasali leaned into the oar, and the boat slid away from the dock. "Anything is safe until it kills you."

The mist absorbed the quiet sounds of shore almost immediately. One of Kit's first projects had been a stone single-arch bridge over water, far to the north in Eskje province. He had visited before construction started. He was there for five days more than he had expected, caught by a snowstorm that left nearly two feet on the ground.

This reminded him of those snowy moonless nights, the air as thick and silencing as a pillow on the ears.

Rasali did not scull so much as steer. It was hard to see far in any direction except up, but perhaps it was true that the mist spoke to her, for she seemed to know where to position the boat for the mist to carry it forward. She followed a small valley until it started to flatten and then mound up. *The Tranquil Crossing* tipped slightly as it slid a few feet to port. The mail carrier made a noise, and immediately stifled it.

Mist was a misnomer. It was denser than it seemed, and sometimes the boat seemed not to move through it so much as over its surface. Tonight it seemed like sea-wrack, the dirty foam that strong winds could whip from ocean waves. Kit reached a hand over the boat's side. The mist piled against his hand, almost dry to the touch, sliding up his forearm with a sensation he could not immediately identify. When he realized it was prickling, he snatched his arm back in and rubbed it on a fold of his coat. The skin burned. Caustic, of course.

The man with the pigs whispered, "Will they come if we talk or make noise?"

"Not to talking, or pigs' squealing," Rasali said. "They seem to like low noises. They'll rise to thunder sometimes."

One of the traders said, "What are they if they're not really fish? What do they look like?" Her voice shook. The mist was weighing on them all: all but Rasali.

"If you want to know you'll have to see one for yourself," Rasali said. "Or try to get a fisher to tell you. They gut and fillet them over the sides of their boats. No one else sees much but meat wrapped in paper, or rolls of black skin for the rope-makers and tanners."

"You've seen them," Kit said.

"They're broad and flat. But ugly . . ."

"And Big Ones?" Kit asked.

Her voice was harsh. "*Them*, we don't talk about here."

No one spoke for a time. Mist—foam—heaped up at the boat's prow and parted, eased to the sides with an almost inaudible hissing. Once the mist off the port side heaved, and something dark broke the surface for a moment, followed by other dark somethings; but the somethings were not close enough to see well. One of the merchants cried without a sound or movement, the tears on his face the only evidence.

The Farside levee showed at last, a black mass that didn't get any closer for what felt like hours. Fighting his fear, Kit leaned over the side, keeping his face away from the surface. "It can't really be bottomless," he said, half to himself. "What's under it?"

"You wouldn't hit the bottom, anyway," Rasali said.

The Tranquil Crossing eased up a long swell of mist and into a hollow. Rasali pointed the ferry along a crease and eased it forward. And then they were suddenly a stone's throw from the Farside dock and the light of its torches.

People on the dock moved as they approached. Just loudly enough to carry, a soft baritone voice called, "Rasali?"

She called back, "Ten this time, Pen."

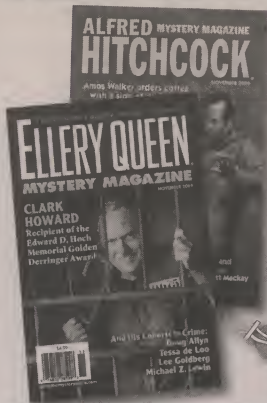
"Anyone need carriers?" A different voice. Several passengers responded.

Rasali shipped the scull while the ferry was still some feet away from the dock, and allowed it to ease forward under its own momentum. She stepped to the prow and picked up a coiled rope there, tossing one end across the narrowing distance. Someone on the dock caught it and pulled the boat in, and in a very few moments, the ferry was snug against the dock.

Disembarking and payment was quicker than embarkation had been. Kit was the last off, and after a brief discussion he hired a carrier to haul his trunk to an inn in town. He turned to say farewell to Rasali. She and the man—Pen, Kit remembered—were untying the boat. "You're not going back already," he said.

"Oh, no." Her voice sounded loose, content, relaxed. Kit hadn't known how tense

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she was. "We're just going to tow the boat over to where the Twins will pull it out." She waved with one hand to the boat launch. A pair of white oxen gleamed in the night, at their heads a woman hardly darker.

"Wait," Kit said to Uni Mason and handed her his folio. "Please tell the innkeeper I'll be there soon." He turned back to Rasali. "May I help?"

In the darkness, he felt more than saw her smile. "Always."

The Red Lurcher, commonly called The Bitch, was a small but noisy inn five minutes' walk from the mist, ten (he was told) from the building site. His room was larger than at The Fish, with an uncomfortable bed and a window seat crammed with quires of ancient, hand-written music. Jenner stayed here, Kit knew, but when he asked the owner (Widson Innkeep, a heavyset man with red hair turning silver), he had not seen him. "You'll be the new one, the architect," Widson said.

"Yes," Kit said. "Please ask him to see me when he gets in."

Widson wrinkled his forehead. "I don't know, he's been out late most days recently, since—" He cut himself off, looking guilty.

"—since the signals informed him that I was here," Kit said. "I understand the impulse."

The innkeeper seemed to consider something for a moment, then said slowly, "We like Jenner here."

"Then we'll try to keep him," Kit said.

When the child Kit had recovered from the illness, he did not return to the crèche—which he would have been leaving in a year in any case—but went straight to his father. Davell Meinem was a slow-talking humorous man who nevertheless had a sharp tongue on the sites of his many projects. He brought Kit with him to his work places: best for the boy to get some experience in the trade.

Kit loved everything about his father's projects: the precisely drawn plans, the orderly progression of construction, the lines and curves of brick and iron and stone rising under the endlessly random sky.

For the first year or two, Kit imitated his father and the workers, building structures of tiny beams and bricks made by the woman set to mind him, a tiler who had lost a hand some years back. Davell collected the boy at the end of the day. "I'm here to inspect the construction," he said, and Kit demonstrated his bridge or tower, or the materials he had laid out in neat lines and stacks. Davell would discuss Kit's work with great seriousness, until it grew too dark to see and they went back to the inn or rented rooms that passed for home near the sites.

Davell spent nights buried in the endless paperwork of his projects, and Kit found this interesting, as well. The pattern that went into building something big was not just the architectural plans, or the construction itself; it was also labor schedules and documentation and materials deliveries. He started to draw his own plans, but he also made up endless correspondences with imaginary providers.

After a while, Kit noticed that a large part of the pattern that made a bridge or a tower was built entirely out of people.

The knock on Kit's door came very late that night, a preemptory rap. Kit put down the quill he was mending, and rolled his shoulders to loosen them. "Yes," he said aloud as he stood.

The man who stormed through the door was as dark as Kit, though perhaps a few years younger. He wore mud-splashed riding clothes.

"I am Kit Meinem of Atyar."

"Jenner Ellar of Atyar. Show it to me." Silently Kit handed the cartel to Jenner,

who glared at it before tossing it onto the table. "It took long enough for them to pick a replacement."

Might as well deal with this right now, Kit thought. "You hoped it would be you."

Jenner eyed Kit for a moment. "Yes. I did."

"You think you're the most qualified to complete the project because you've been here for the last—what is it? Year?"

"I know the sites," Jenner said. "I worked with Teniant to make those plans. And then Empire sends—" He turned to face the empty hearth.

"—Empire sends someone new," Kit said to Jenner's back. "Someone with connections in the capital, influential friends but no experience with this site, this bridge. It should have been you, yes?"

Jenner was still.

"But it isn't," Kit said, and let the words hang for a moment. "I've built nine bridges in the past twenty years. Four suspension bridges, three major spans. Two bridges over mist. You've done three, and the biggest span you've directed was three hundred and fifty feet, six stone arches over shallow water and shifting gravel up on Mati River."

"I know," Jenner snapped.

"It's a good bridge." Kit poured two glasses of whiskey from a stoneware pitcher by the window. "I coached down to see it before I came here. It's well made, and you were on budget and nearly on schedule in spite of the drought. Better, the locals still like you. Asked how you're doing these days. Here."

Jenner took the glass Kit offered. *Good*. Kit continued, "Meinems have built bridges—and roads and aqueducts and stadia, a hundred sorts of public structures—for Empire for a thousand years." Jenner turned to speak, but Kit held up his hand. "This doesn't mean we're any better at it than Ellars. But Empire knows us—and we know Empire, how to do what we need to. If they'd given you this bridge, you'd be replaced within a year. But I can get this bridge built, and I will." Kit sat and leaned forward, elbows on knees. "With you. You're talented. You know the site. You know the people. Help me make this bridge."

"It's real to you," Jenner said finally, and Kit knew what he meant: *You care about this work. It's not just another tick on a list.*

"Yes," Kit said. "You'll be my second for this one. I'll show you how to deal with Atyar, and I'll help you with contacts. And your next project will belong entirely to you. This is the first bridge, but it isn't going to be the only one across the mist."

Together they drank. The whiskey bit at Kit's throat and made his eyes water. "Oh," he said, "that's *awful*."

Jenner laughed suddenly, and met his eyes for the first time: a little wary still, but willing to be convinced. "Farside whiskey is terrible. You drink much of this, you'll be running for Atyar in a month."

"Maybe we'll have something better ferried across," Kit said.

Preparations were not so far along on this side. The heaps of blocks at the construction site were not so massive, and it was harder to find local workers. In discussions between Kit, Jenner, and the Near- and Farside masons who would oversee construction of the pillars, final plans materialized. This would be unique, the largest structure of its kind ever attempted: a single-span chain suspension bridge a quarter of a mile long. The basic plan remained unchanged: the bridge would be supported by eyebar-and-bolt chains, four on each side, allowed to play independently to compensate for the slight shifts that would be caused by traffic on the roadbed. The huge eyebars and their bolts were being fashioned five hundred miles away and far to the west, where iron was common and the smelting and ironworking were the best in Empire. Kit had just written to the foundries to start the work again.

The pillar and anchorage on Nearside would be built of gold limestone anchored with pilings into the bedrock; on Farside, they would be pink-gray granite with a funnel-shaped foundation. The towers' heights would be nearly three hundred feet. There were taller towers back in Atyar, but none had to stand against the compression of the bridge.

The initial tests with the fish-skin rope had showed it to be nearly as strong as iron, without the weight. When Kit asked the Farside tanners and rope-makers about its durability, he was taken a day's travel east to Meknai, to a waterwheel that used knotted belts of the material for its drive. The belts, he was told, were seventy-five years old and still sound. Fish-skin wore like maplewood, so long as it wasn't left in mist, but it required regular maintenance.

He watched Meknai's little river for a time. There had been rain recently in the foothills, and the water was quick and abrupt as light. *Water bridges are easy*, he thought a little wistfully, and then: *Anyone can bridge water*.

Kit revised the plans again, to use the lighter material where they could. Jenner crossed the mist to Nearside, to work with Daell and Stivvan Cabler on the expansion of their workshops and ropewalk.

Without Jenner (who was practically a local, as Kit was told again and again), Kit felt the difference in attitudes on the river's two banks more clearly. Most Farsiders shared the Nearsiders' attitudes: money is money and always welcome, and there was a sense of the excitement that comes of any great project; but there was more resistance here. Empire was effectively split by the river, and the lands to the east—starting with Faside—had never seen their destinies as closely linked to Atyar in the west. They were overseen by the eastern capital, Triple; their taxes went to building necessities on their own side of the mist. Empire's grasp on the eastern lands was loose, and had never needed to be tighter.

The bridge would change things. Travel between Atyar and Triple would grow more common, and perhaps Empire would no longer hold the eastern lands so gently. Triple's lack of enthusiasm for the project showed itself in delayed deliveries of stone and iron. Kit traveled five days along the Triple road to the district seat to present his credentials to the governor, and wrote sharp letters to the Department of Roads in Triple. Things became a little easier.

It was midwinter before the design was finished. Kit avoided crossing the mist. Rasali Ferry crossed seventeen times. He managed to see her nearly every time, at least for as long as it took to share a beer.

The second time Kit crossed, it was midmorning of an early spring day. The mist mirrored the overcast sky above: pale and flat, like a layer of fog in a dell. Rasali was loading the ferry at the upper dock when Kit arrived, and to his surprise she smiled at him, her face suddenly beautiful. Kit nodded to the stranger watching Valo toss immense cloth-wrapped bales down to Rasali, then greeted the Ferrys. Valo paused for a moment, but did not return Kit's greeting, only bent again to his work. Valo had been avoiding him since nearly the beginning of his time there. *Later*. With a mental shrug, Kit turned from Valo to Rasali. She was catching and stacking the enormous bales easily.

"What's in those? You throw them as if they were—"

"—paper," she finished. "The very best Ibraric mulberry paper. Light as lambswool. You probably have a bunch of this stuff in that folio of yours."

Kit thought of the vellum he used for his plans, and the paper he used for everything else: made of cotton from far to the south, its surface buffed until it felt hard and smooth as enamelwork. He said, "All the time. It's good paper."

Rasali piled on bales and more bales, until the ferry was stacked three and four high. He added, "Is there going to be room for me in there?"

"Pilar Runn and Valo aren't coming with us," she said. "You'll have to sit on top of the bales, but there's room as long as you sit still and don't wobble."

As Rasali pushed away from the dock Kit asked, "Why isn't the trader coming with her paper?"

"Why would she? Pilar has a broker on the other side." Her hands busy, she tipped her head to one side, in a gesture that somehow conveyed a shrug. "Mist is dangerous."

Somewhere along the river a ferry was lost every few months: horses, people, cartage, all lost. Fishers stayed closer to shore and died less often. It was harder to calculate the impact to trade and communications of this barrier splitting Empire in half.

This journey—in daylight, alone with Rasali—was very different than Kit's earlier crossing: less frightening but somehow wilder, stranger. The cold wind down the river was cutting and brought bits of dried foam to rest on his skin, but they blew off quickly, without pain and leaving no mark. The wind fell to a breeze and then to nothing as they navigated into the mist, as if they were buried in feathers or snow.

They moved through what looked like a layered maze of thick cirrus clouds. He watched the mist along the *Crossing's* side until they passed over a small hole like a pockmark, straight down and no more than a foot across. For an instant he glimpsed open space below them; they were floating on a layer of mist above an air pocket deep enough to swallow the boat. He rolled onto his back to stare up at the sky until he stopped shaking; when he looked again, they were out of the maze, it seemed. The boat floated along a gently curving channel. He relaxed a little, and moved to watch Rasali.

"How fares your bridge?" Rasali said at last, her voice muted in the muffled air. This had to be a courtesy—everyone in town seemed to know everything about the bridge's progress—but Kit was used to answering questions to which people already knew the answers. He had found patience to be a highly effective tool.

"Farside foundations are doing well. We have maybe six more months before the anchorage is done, but pilings for the pillar's foundation are in place and we can start building. Six weeks early," Kit said, a little smugly, though this was a victory no one else would appreciate, and in any case the weather was as much to be credited as any action on his part. "On Nearside, we've run into basalt that's too hard to drill easily, so we sent for a specialist. The signal flags say she's arrived, and that's why I'm crossing."

She said nothing, seemingly intent on moving the great scull. He watched her for a time, content to see her shoulders flex, hear her breath forcing itself out in smooth waves. Over the faint yeast scent of the mist, he smelled her sweat, or thought he did. She frowned slightly, but he could not tell whether it was due to her labor, or something in the mist, or something else. Who was she, really? "May I ask a question, Rasali Ferry?"

Rasali nodded, eyes on the mist in front of the boat.

Actually, he had several things he wished to know: about her, about the river, about the people here. He picked one, almost at random. "What is bothering Valo?"

"He's transparent, isn't he? He thinks you take something away from him," Rasali said. "He is too young to know what you take is unimportant."

Kit thought about it. "His work?"

"His work is unimportant?" She laughed, a sudden puff of an exhale as she pulled. "We have a lot of money, Ferrys. We own land and rent it out—the Deer's Heart belongs to my family; do you know that? He's young. He wants what we all want at his age. A chance to test himself against the world and see if he measures up. And because he's a Ferry, he wants to be tested against adventures. Danger. The mist. Valo thinks you take that away from him."

"But he's not immortal," Kit said. "Whatever he thinks. The river can kill him. It will, sooner or later. It—"

—*will kill you.* Kit caught himself, rolled onto his back again to look up at the sky. In The Bitch's taproom one night, a local man had told him about Rasali's family: a history of deaths, of boats lost in a silent hissing of mist, or the rending of wood, or screams that might be human and might be a horse. "So everyone wears ash-color for a month or two, and then the next Ferry takes up the business. Rasali's still new, two years maybe. When she goes, it'll be Valo, then Rasali's youngest sister, then Valo's sister. Unless Rasali or Valo have kids by then."

"They're always beautiful," the man had added after some more porter: "the Ferrys. I suppose that's to make up for having such short lives."

Kit looked down from the paper bales at Rasali. "But you're different. You don't feel you're losing anything."

"You don't know what I feel, Kit Meinem of Atyar." Cool light moved along the muscles of her arms. Her voice came again, softer. "I am not young; I don't need to prove myself. But I will lose this. The mist, the silence."

Then tell me, he did not say. *Show me.*

She was silent for the rest of the trip. Kit thought perhaps she was angry, but when he invited her, she accompanied him to the building site.

The quiet pasture was gone. All that remained of the tall grass was struggling tufts and dirty straw. The air smelled of sweat and meat and the bitter scent of hot metal. There were more blocks here now, a lot more. The pits for the anchorage and the pillar were excavated to bedrock, overshadowed by mountains of dirt. One sheep remained, skinned and spitted, and greasy smoke rose as a girl turned it over a fire beside the temporary forge. Kit had considered the pasture a nuisance, but looking at the skewered sheep, he felt a twinge of guilt.

The rest of the flock had been replaced by sturdy-looking men and women, who were using rollers to shift stones down a dugout ramp into the hole for the anchorage foundation. Dust muted the bright colors of their short kilts and breastbands and dulled their skin, and in spite of the cold, sweat had cleared tracks along their muscles.

One of the workers waved to Rasali and she waved back. Kit recalled his name: Mik Rounder, very strong but he needed direction. Had they been lovers? Relationships out here were tangled in ways Kit didn't understand; in the capital such things were more formal and often involved contracts.

Jenner and a small woman knelt, conferring, on the exposed stone floor of the large pit. When Kit slid down the ladder to join them, the small woman bowed slightly. Her eyes and short hair and skin all seemed to be turning the same iron-gray. "I am Liu Breaker of Hoic. Your specialist."

"Kit Meinem of Atyar. How shall we address this?"

"Your Jenner says you need some of this basalt cleared away, yes?"

Kit nodded.

Liu knelt to run her hand along the pit's floor. "See where the color and texture change along this line? Your Jenner was right: this upthrust of basalt is a problem. Here where the shale is, you can carve out most of the foundation the usual way with drills, picks. But the basalt is too hard to drill." She straightened and brushed dust from her knees. "Have you ever seen explosives used?"

Kit shook his head. "We haven't needed them for any of my projects. I've never been to the mines, either."

"Not much good anywhere else," Liu said, "but very useful for breaking up large amounts of rock. A lot of the blocks you have here were loosed using explosives." She grinned. "You'll like the noise."

"We can't afford to break the bedrock's structural integrity."

"I brought enough powder for a number of small charges. Comparatively small."

"How—"

Liu held up a weathered hand. "I don't need to understand bridges to walk across one. Yes?"

Kit laughed outright. "Yes."

Liu Breaker was right; Kit liked the noise very much. Liu would not allow anyone close to the pit, but even from what she considered a safe distance, behind huge piles of dirt, the explosion was an immense shattering thing, a crack of thunder that shook the earth. There was a second of echoing silence. The workers, after a collective gasp and some scattered screams, cheered and stamped their feet. A small cloud of mingled smoke and rock-dust eased over the pit's edge, sharp with the smell of saltpeter. The birds were not happy; with the explosion, they burst from their trees and wheeled nervously.

Grinning, Liu climbed from her bunker near the pit, her face dust-caked everywhere but around her eyes, which had been protected by the wooden slit-goggles now hanging around her neck. "So far, so good," she shouted over the ringing in Kit's ears. Seeing his face, she laughed. "These are nothing—gnat sneezes. You should hear when we quarry granite up at Hoic."

Kit was going to speak more with her when he noticed Rasali striding away. He had forgotten she was there; now he followed her, half shouting to hear himself. "Some noise, yes?"

Rasali whirled. "What are you thinking?" She was shaking and her lips were white. Her voice was very loud.

Taken aback, Kit answered, "We are blowing the foundations." *Rage? Fear?* He wished he could think a little more clearly, but the sound had stunned his wits.

"And making the earth shake! The Big Ones come to thunder, Kit!"

"It wasn't thunder," he said.

"Tell me it wasn't worse!" Tears glittered in her eyes. Her voice was dulled by the echo in his ears. "They will come, I *know* it."

He reached a hand out to her. "It's a tall levee, Rasali. Even if they do, they're not going to come over that." His heart in his chest thrummed. His head was hurting. It was so hard to hear her.

"*No one* knows what they'll do! They used to destroy whole towns, drifting inland on foggy nights. Why do you think they built the levees, a thousand years ago? The Big Ones—"

She stopped shouting, listening. She mouthed something, but Kit could not hear her over the beating in his ears, his heart, his head. He realized suddenly that these were not the after-effects of the explosion; the air itself was beating. He was aware at the edges of his vision of the other workers, every face turned toward the mist. There was nothing to see but the overcast sky. No one moved.

But the sky was moving.

Behind the levee the river mist was rising, dirty gray-gold against the steel-gray of the clouds in a great boiling upheaval, at least a hundred feet high, to be seen over the levee. The mist was seething, breaking open in great swirls and rifts, and everything moving, changing. Kit had seen a great fire once, when a warehouse of linen had burned, and the smoke had poured upward and looked a little like this before it was torn apart by the wind.

Gaps opened in the mountain of mist and closed; and others opened, darker the deeper they were. And through those gaps, in the brown-black shadows at the heart of the mist, was movement.

The gaps closed. After an eternity, the mist slowly smoothed and then settled back, behind the levee, and could no longer be seen. He wasn't really sure when the thrumming of the air blended back into the ringing of his ears.

"Gone," Rasali said with a sound like a sob.

A worker made one of the vivid jokes that come after fear; the others laughed, too loud. A woman ran up the levee and shouted down, "Farside levees are fine; ours are fine." More laughter: people jogged off to Nearside to check on their families.

The back of Kit's hand was burning. A flake of foam had settled and left an irregular mark. "I only saw mist," Kit said. "Was there a Big One?"

Rasali shook herself, stern now but no longer angry or afraid. Kit had learned this about the Ferrys, that their emotions coursed through them and then dissolved. "It was in there. I've seen the mist boil like that before, but never so big. Nothing else could heave it up like that."

"On purpose?"

"Oh, who knows? They're a mystery, the Big Ones." She met his eyes. "I hope your bridge is very high, Kit Meinem of Atyar."

Kit looked to where the mist had been, but there was only sky. "The deck will be two hundred feet above the mist. High enough. I hope."

Liu Breaker walked up to them, rubbing her hands on her leather leggings. "So, *that's* not something that happens at Hoic. *Very* exciting. What do you call that? How do we prevent it next time?"

Rasali looked at the smaller woman for a moment. "I don't think you can. Big Ones come when they come."

Liu said, "They do not always come?"

Rasali shook her head.

"Well, cold comfort is better than no comfort, as my Da says."

Kit rubbed his temples; the headache remained. "We'll continue."

"Then you'll have to be careful," Rasali said. "Or you will kill us all."

"The bridge will save many lives," Kit said. *Yours, eventually.*

Rasali turned on her heel.

Kit did not follow her, not that day. Whether it was because subsequent explosions were smaller ("As small as they can be and still break rock," Liu said), or because they were doing other things, the Big Ones did not return, though fish were plentiful for the three months it took to plan and plant the charges, and break the bedrock.

There was also a Meinem tradition of metal-working, and Meinem reeves, and many Meinems went into fields altogether different; but Kit had known from nearly the beginning that he would be one of the building Meinems. He loved the invisible architecture of construction, looking for a compromise between the vision in his head and the sites, the materials, and the people that would make them real. The challenge was to compromise as little as possible.

Architecture was studied at University. His tutor was a materials specialist, a woman who had directed construction on an incredible twenty-three bridges. Skossa Timt was so old that her skin and hair had faded together to the white of Gani marble, and she walked with a cane she had designed herself, for efficiency. She taught him much. Materials had rules, patterns of behavior: they bent or crumbled or cracked or broke under quantifiable stresses. They strengthened or destroyed one another. Even the best materials in the most efficient combinations did not last forever—she tapped her own forehead with one gnarled finger and laughed—but if he did his work right, they could last a thousand years or more. "But not forever," Skossa said. "Do your best, but don't forget this."

* * *

The anchorages and pillars grew. Workers came from towns up and down each bank; and locals, idle or inclined to make money from outside, were hired on the spot. Generally the new people were welcome: they paid for rooms and food and goods of all sorts. The taverns settled in to making double and then triple batches of everything, threw out new wings and stables. Nearside accepted the new people easily, the only fights late at night when people had been drinking and flirting more than they should. Farside had fist fights more frequently, though they decreased steadily as skeptics gave in to the money that flowed into Farside, or to the bridge itself, its pillars too solid to be denied.

Farmers and husbanders sold their fields, and new buildings sprawled out from the towns' hearts. Some were made of wattle and daub, slapped together above stamped-earth floors that still smelled of sheep dung; others, small but permanent, went up more slowly, as the bridge builders laid fieldstones and timber in their evenings and on rest days.

The new people and locals mixed together until it was hard to tell the one from the other, though the older townfolk kept scrupulous track of who truly belonged. For those who sought lovers and friends, the new people were an opportunity to meet someone other than the men and women they had known since childhood. Many met casual lovers, and several term-partnered with new people. There was even a Near-side wedding, between Kes Tiler and a black-eyed builder from far to the south called Jolite Deveren, whatever that meant.

Kit did not have lovers. Working every night until he fell asleep over his paperwork, he didn't miss it much, except late on certain nights when thunderstorms left him restless and unnaturally alert, as if lightning ran under his skin. Some nights he thought of Rasali, wondered whether she was sleeping with someone that night or alone, and wondered if the storm had awakened her, left her restless as well.

Kit saw a fair amount of Rasali when they were both on the same side of the mist. She was clever and calm, and the only person who did not want to talk about the bridge all the time.

Kit did not forget what Rasali said about Valo. Kit had been a young man himself not so many years before, and he remembered what young men and women felt, the hunger to prove themselves against the world. Kit didn't need Valo to accept the bridge—he was scarcely into adulthood and his only influence over the townspeople was based on his work—but Kit liked the youth, who had Rasali's eyes and sometimes her effortless way of moving.

Valo started asking questions, first of the other workers and then of Kit. His boat-building experience meant the questions were good ones, and he already designed boats. Kit passed on the first things he had learned as a child on his father's sites, and showed him the manipulation of the immense blocks, and the tricky balance of material and plan; the strength of will that allows a man to direct a thousand people toward a single vision. Valo was too honest not to recognize Kit's mastery, and too competitive not to try and meet Kit on his own ground. He came more often to visit the construction sites.

After a season, Kit took him aside. "You could be a builder, if you wished."

Valo flushed. "Build things? You mean, bridges?"

"Or houses, or granges, or retaining walls. Or bridges. You could make people's lives better."

"Change people's lives?" He frowned suddenly. "No."

"Our lives change all the time, whether we want them to or not," Kit said. "Valo Ferry, you are smart. You are good with people. You learn quickly. If you were interested, I could start teaching you myself, or send you to Atyar to study there."

"Valo Builder . . ." he said, trying it out, then: "No." But after that, whenever he

had time free from ferrying or building boats, he was always to be found on the site. Kit knew that the answer would be different the next time he asked. There was for everything a possibility, an invisible pattern that could be made manifest given work and the right materials. Kit wrote to an old friend or two, finding contacts that would help Valo when the time came.

The pillars and anchorages grew. Winter came, and summer, and a second winter. There were falls, a broken arm, two sets of cracked ribs. Someone on Farside had her toes crushed when one of the stones slipped from its rollers and she lost the foot. The bridge was on schedule, even after the delay caused by the slow rock-breaking. There were no problems with payroll or the Department of Roads or Empire, and only minor, manageable issues with the occasionally disruptive representatives from Triple or the local governors.

Kit knew he was lucky.

The first death came during one of Valo's visits.

It was early in the second winter of the bridge, and Kit had been in Farside for three months. He had learned that winter meant gray skies and rain and sometimes snow. Soon they would have to stop the heavy work for the season. Still, it had been a good day, and the workers had lifted and placed almost a hundred stones.

Valo had returned after three weeks at Nearside, building a boat for Jenna Bluefish. Kit found him staring up at the slim tower through a rain so faint it felt like fog. The black opening of the roadway arch looked out of place, halfway up the pillar.

Valo said, "You're a lot farther along since I was here last. How tall now?"

Kit got this question a lot. "A hundred and five feet, more or less. A third finished."

Valo smiled, shook his head. "Hard to believe it'll stay up."

"There's a tower in Atyar, black basalt and iron, five hundred feet. Five times this tall."

"It just looks so delicate," Valo said. "I know what you said, that most of the stress on the pillar is compression, but it still looks as though it'll snap in half."

"After a while, you'll have more experience with suspension bridges and it will seem less . . . unsettling. Would you like to see the progress?"

Valo's eyes brightened. "May I? I don't want to get in the way."

"I haven't been up yet today, and they'll be finishing up soon. Scaffold or stairwell?"

Valo looked at the scaffolding against one face of the pillar, the ladders tied into place within it, and shivered. "I can't believe people go up that. Stairs, I think."

Kit followed Valo. The steep internal stair was three feet wide and endlessly turning, five steps up and then a platform; turn to the left, and then five more steps and turn. Eventually, the stairs would at need be lit by lanterns set into alcoves at every third turning, but today Kit and Valo felt their way up, fingers trailing along the cold, damp stone, a small lantern in Valo's hand.

The stairwell smelled of water and earth and the thin smell of the burning lamp oil. Some of the workers hated the stairs and preferred the ladders outside, but Kit liked it. For these few moments, he was part of his bridge, a strong bone buried deep in flesh he had created.

They came out at the top and paused a moment to look around the unfinished courses, and the black silhouette of the winch against the dulling sky. The last few workers were breaking down the shear-legs, which had been used to move blocks around the pillar. A lantern hung from a pole jammed into one of the holes the laborers would fill with rods and molten iron, later in construction. Kit nodded to them as Valo went to an edge to look down.

"It is wonderful," Valo said, smiling. "Being high like this—you can look right down into people's kitchen yards. Look, Teli Carpenter has a pig smoking."

"You don't need to see it to know that," Kit said dryly. "I've been smelling it for two days."

Valo snorted. "Can you see as far as White Peak yet?"

"On a clear day, yes," Kit said. "I was up here two—"

A heavy sliding sound and a scream; Kit whirled to see one of the workers on her back, one of the shearleg's timbers across her chest. Loreh Tanner, a local. Kit ran the few steps to Loreh and dropped beside her. One man, the man who had been working with her, said, "It slipped—oh Loreh, please hang on," but Kit could see it was futile. She was pinned to the pillar, chest flattened, one shoulder visibly dislocated, unconscious, her breathing labored. Black foam bloomed from her lips in the lantern's bad light.

Kit took her cold hand. "It's all right, Loreh. It's all right." It was a lie and in any case she could not hear him, but the others would. "Get Hall," one of the workers said, and Kit nodded: Hall was a surgeon. And then, "And get Obal, someone. Where's her husband?" Footsteps ran down the stairs and were lost into the hiss of rain just beginning and someone's crying and Loreh's wet breathing.

Kit glanced up. His chest heaving, Valo stood staring at the body. Kit said to him, "Help find Hall," and when the boy did not move, he repeated it, his voice sharper. Valo said nothing, did not stop looking at Loreh until he spun and ran down the stairs. Kit heard shouting, far below, as the first messenger ran toward the town.

Loreh took a last shuddering breath and died.

Kit looked at the others around Loreh's body. The man holding Loreh's other hand pressed his face against it, crying helplessly. The two other workers left here knelt at her feet, a man and a woman, huddled close though they were not a couple. "Tell me," he said.

"I tried to stop it from hitting her," the woman said. She cradled one arm: obviously broken, though she didn't seem to have noticed. "But it just kept falling."

"She was tired; she must have gotten careless," the man said, and the broken-armed woman said, "I don't want to think about that sound." Words fell from them like blood from a cut.

Kit listened. This was what they needed right now, to speak and to be heard. So he listened, and when the others came, Loreh's husband white-lipped and angry-eyed, and the surgeon Obal and six other workers, Kit listened to them as well, and gradually moved them down through the pillar and back toward the warm lights and comfort of Farside.

Kit had lost people before, and it was always like this. There would be tears tonight, and anger at him and at his bridge, anger at fate for permitting this. There would be sadness, and nightmares. There would be lovemaking, and the holding close of children and friends and dogs—affirmations of life in the cold wet night.

His tutor at University had said, during one of her frequent digressions from the nature of materials and the principles of architecture, "Things will go wrong."

It was winter, but in spite of the falling snow they walked slowly to the coffee-house, as Skossa looked for purchase for her cane. She continued, "On long projects, you'll forget that you're not one of them. But if there's an accident? You're slapped in the face with it. Whatever you're feeling? Doesn't matter. Guilty, grieving, alone, worried about the schedule. None of it. What matters is *their* feelings. So listen to them. Respect what they're going through."

She paused then, tapped her cane against the ground thoughtfully. "No, I lie. It does matter, but you will have to find your own strength, your own resources elsewhere."

"Friends?" Kit said doubtfully. He knew already that he wanted a career like his father's. He would not be in the same place for more than a few years at a time.

"Yes, friends." Snow collected on Skossa's hair, but she didn't seem to notice. "Kit, I worry about you. You're good with people, I've seen it. You like them. But there's a limit for you." He opened his mouth to protest, but she held up her hand to silence him. "I know. You do care. But inside the framework of a project. Right now it's your studies. Later it'll be roads and bridges. But people around you—their lives go on outside the framework. They're not just tools to your hand, even likable tools. Your life should go on, too. You should have more than roads to live for. Because if something does go wrong, you'll need what *you're* feeling to matter, to someone somewhere, anyway."

Kit walked through Farside toward the Red Lurcher. Most people were home or at one of the taverns by now, a village turned inward; but he heard footsteps running behind him. He turned quickly—it was not unknown for people reeling from a loss to strike at whatever they blamed, and sometimes that was a person.

It was Valo. Though his fists were balled, Kit could tell immediately that he was angry but not looking for a fight. For a moment, Kit wished he didn't need to listen, that he could just go back to his rooms and sleep for a thousand hours; but there was a stricken look in Valo's eyes: Valo, who looked so much like Rasali. He hoped that Rasali and Loreh hadn't been close.

Kit said gently, "Why aren't you inside? It's cold." As he said it, he realized suddenly that it *was* cold; the rain had settled into a steady cold flow.

"I will, I was, I mean, but I came out for a second, because I thought maybe I could find you, because—"

The boy was shivering, too. "Where are your friends? Let's get you inside. It'll be better there."

"No," he said. "I have to know first. It's like this always? If I do this, build things, it'll happen for me? Someone will die?"

"It might. It probably will, eventually."

Valo said an unexpected thing. "I see. It's just that she had just gotten married."

The blood on Loreh's lips, the wet sound of her crushed chest as she took her last breaths—"Yes," Kit said. "She was."

"I just . . . I had to know if I need to be ready for this." It seemed callous, but Ferrys were used to dying, to death. "I guess I'll find out."

"I hope you don't have to." The rain was getting heavier. "You should be inside, Valo."

Valo nodded. "Rasali—I wish she were here. She could help maybe. You should go in, too. You're shivering."

Kit watched him go. Valo had not invited him to accompany him back into the light and the warmth; he knew better than to expect that, but for a moment he had permitted himself to hope otherwise.

Kit slipped through the stables and through the back door at The Bitch. Wisdon Innkeep, hands full of mugs for the taproom, saw him and nodded, face unsmiling but not hostile. That was good, Kit thought: as good as it would get, tonight.

He entered his room and shut the door, leaned his back to it as if holding the world out. Someone had already been in his room: a lamp had been lit against the darkness, a fire laid, and bread and cheese and a tankard of ale set by the window to stay cool.

He began to cry.

The news went across the river by signal flags. No one worked on the bridge the next day, or the day after that. Kit did all the right things, letting his grief and guilt overwhelm him only when he was alone, huddled in front of the fire in his room.

The third day, Rasali arrived from Nearside with a boat filled with crates of north-

land herbs on their way east. Kit was sitting in The Bitch's taproom, listening. People were coping, starting to look forward again. They should be able to get back to it soon, the next clear day. He would offer them something that would be an immediate, visible accomplishment, something different, perhaps guidelining the ramp.

He didn't see Rasali come into the taproom; only felt her hand on his shoulder and heard her voice in his ear. "Come with me," she murmured.

He looked up puzzled, as though she was a stranger. "Rasali Ferry, why are you here?"

She said only, "Come for a walk, Kit."

It was raining, but he accompanied her anyway, pulling a scarf over his head when the first cold drops hit his face.

She said nothing as they splashed through Farside. She was leading him somewhere, but he didn't care where, grateful not to have to be the decisive one, the strong one. After a time, she opened a door and led him through it into a small room filled with light and warmth.

"My house," she said. "And Valo's. He's still at the boatyard. Sit."

She pointed and Kit dropped onto the settle beside the fire. Rasali swiveled a pot hanging from a bracket out of the fire and ladled something out. She handed a mug to him and sat. "So. Drink."

It was spiced porter, and the warmth eased into the tightness in his chest. "Thank you."

"Talk."

"This is such a loss for you all, I know," he said. "Did you know Loreh well?"

She shook her head. "This is not for me, this is for you. Tell me."

"I'm fine," he said, and when she didn't say anything, he repeated, with a flicker of anger: "I'm *fine*, Rasali. I can handle this."

"Probably you can," Rasali said. "But you're not fine. She died, and it was your bridge she died for. You don't feel responsible? I don't believe it."

"Of course I feel responsible," he snapped.

The fire cast gold light across her broad cheekbones when she turned her face to him, but to his surprise she said nothing, only looked at him and waited.

"She's not the first," Kit said, surprising himself. "The first project I had sole charge of, a toll gate. Such a little project, such a dumb little project to lose someone on. The wood frame for the passageway collapsed before we got the keystone in. The whole arch came down. Someone got killed." It had been a very young man, slim and tall, with a limp. He was raising his little sister; she hadn't been more than ten. Running loose in the fields around the site, she had missed the collapse, the boy's death. Dafuen? Naus? He couldn't remember his name. And the girl—what had her name been? *I should remember. I owe that much to them.*

"Every time I lose someone," he said at last, "I remember the others. There've been twelve, in twenty-three years. Not so many, considering. Building's dangerous. My record's better than most."

"But it doesn't matter, does it?" she said. "You still feel you killed each one of them, as surely as if you'd thrown them off a bridge yourself."

"It's my responsibility. The first one, Duar—" *that* had been his name; there it was. The name loosened something in Kit. His face warmed: tears, hot tears running down his face.

"It's all right," she said. She held him until he stopped crying.

"How did you know?" he said finally.

"I am the eldest surviving member of the Ferry family," she said. "My aunt died seven years ago. And then I watched my brother leave to cross the mist, four years ago now. It was a perfect day, calm and sunny, but he never made it. He went instead

of me because on that day the river felt wrong to me. It could have been me. It should have, maybe. So I understand."

She stretched a little. "Not that most people don't. If Petro Housewright sends his daughter to select timber in the mountains, and she doesn't come back—eaten by wolves, struck by lightning, I don't know—is Petro to blame? It's probably the wolves or the lightning. Maybe it's the daughter, if she did something stupid. And it is Petro, a little; she wouldn't have been there at all if he hadn't sent her. And it's her mother for being fearless and teaching that to her daughter; and Thom Green for wanting a new room to his house. Everyone, except maybe the wolves, feels at least a little responsible. This path leads nowhere. Loreh would have died sooner or later." Rasali added softly, "We all do."

"Can you accept death so readily?" he asked. "Yours, even?"

She leaned back, her face suddenly weary. "What else can I do, Kit? Someone must ferry, and I am better suited than most—and by more than my blood. I love the mist, its currents and the smell of it and the power in my body as I push us all through. Petro's daughter—she did not want to die when the wolves came, I'm sure; but she loved selecting timber."

"If it comes for you?" he said softly. "Would you be so sanguine then?"

She laughed, and the pensiveness was gone. "No, indeed. I will curse the stars and go down fighting. But it will still have been a wonderful thing, to cross the mist."

At University, Kit's relationships had all been casual. There were lectures that everyone attended, and he lived near streets and pubs crowded with students; but the physical students had a tradition of keeping to themselves that was rooted in the personal preferences of their predecessors, and in their own. The only people who worked harder than the engineers were the ale-makers, the University joke went. Kit and the other physical students talked and drank and roomed and slept together.

In his third year, he met Domhu Canna at the arcade where he bought vellums and paper: a small woman with a heart-shaped face and hair in black clouds she kept somewhat confined by grey ribands. She was a philosophical student from a city two thousand miles to the east, on the coast.

He was fascinated. Her mind was abrupt and fish-quick and made connections he didn't understand. To her, everything was a metaphor, a symbol for something else. People, she said, could be better understood by comparing their lives to animals, to the seasons, to the structure of certain lyrical songs, to a gambling game.

This was another form of pattern-making, he saw. Perhaps people were like teamed oxen to be led, or like metals to be smelted and shaped to one's purpose; or as the stones for a dry-laid wall, which had to be carefully selected for shape and strength, and sorted, and placed. This last suited him best. What held them together was no external mortar but their own weight, and the planning and patience of the drystone builder. But it was an inadequate metaphor: people were this, but they were all the other things, as well.

He never understood what Domhu found attractive in him. They never talked about regularizing their relationship. When her studies were done halfway through his final year, she returned to her city to help found a new university, and in any case her people did not enter into term marriages. They separated amicably, and with a sense of loss on his part at least; but it did not occur to him until years later that things might have been different.

The winter was rainy but there were days they could work, and they did. By spring, there had been other deaths unrelated to the bridge on both banks: a woman who died in childbirth; a child who had never breathed properly in his short life; two

fisherfolk lost when they capsized; several who died for the various reasons that old or sick people died.

Over the spring and summer they finished the anchorages, featureless masses of blocks and mortar anchored to the bedrock. They were buried so that only a few courses of stone showed above the ground. The anchoring bolts were each tall as a man, hidden safely behind the portals through which the chains would pass.

The Farside pillar was finished by midwinter of the third year, well before the Nearside tower. Jenner and Teniant Planner had perfected a signal system that allowed detailed technical information to pass between the banks, and documents traveled each time a ferry crossed. Rasali made sixty-eight trips back and forth; though he spent much of his time with Kit, Valo made twenty. Kit did not cross the mist at all unless the flags told him he must.

It was early spring and Kit was in Farside when the signals went up: *Message. Imperial seal.*

He went to Rasali at once.

"I can't go," she said. "I just got here yesterday. The Big Ones—"

"I have to get across, and Valo's on Nearside. There's news from the capital."

"News has always waited before."

"No, it hasn't. You forced it to, but news waited restlessly, pacing along the levee until we could pick it up."

"Use the flags," she said, a little impatiently.

"The Imperial seal can't be broken by anyone but me or Jenner. He's over here. I'm sorry," he said, thinking of her brother, dead four years before.

"If you die no one can read it, either," she said, but they left just after dusk anyway. "If we must go, better then than earlier or later," she said.

He met her at the upper dock at dusk. The sky was streaked with bright bands of green and gold, clouds catching the last of the sun, but they radiated no light, themselves just reflections. The current down the river was steady and light. The mist between the levees was already in shadow, shaped into smooth dunes twenty feet high.

Rasali waited silently, coiling and uncoiling a rope in her hands. Beside her stood two women and a dog: dealers in spices returning from the plantations of Gloth, the dog whining and restless. Kit was burdened with document cases filled with vellum and paper, rolled tightly and wrapped in oilcloth. Rasali seated the merchants and their dog in the ferry's bow, then untied and pushed off in silence. Kit sat near her.

She stood at the stern, braced against the scull. For a moment he could pretend that this was water they moved on and he half-expected to hear sloshing; but the big paddle made no noise. It was so silent that he could hear her breath, the dog's nervous panting aft, and his own pulse, too fast. Then the *Crossing* slid up the long slope of a mist dune and there was no possibility that this could be anything but mist.

He heard a soft sighing, like air entering a once-sealed bottle. It was hard to see so far, but the lingering light showed him a heaving of the mist on the face of a neighboring dune, like a bubble coming to the surface of hot mud. The dome grew and then burst. There was a gasp from one of the women. A shape rolled away, too dark for Kit to see more than its length.

"What—" he said in wonder.

"Fish," Rasali breathed to Kit. "Not small ones. They are biting tonight. We should not have come."

It was night now; the first tiny moon appeared, scarcely brighter than a star, followed by other stars. Rasali oared gently across through the dunes, face turned to the sky. At first he thought she was praying, then realized she was navigating. There were more fish now, and each time the sighing sound, the dark shape half-seen. He heard someone singing, the voice carrying somehow to them, from far behind.

"The fishers," Rasali said. "They will stay close to the levees tonight. I wish . . ."

But she left the wish unspoken. They were over the deep mist now. He could not say how he knew this. He had a sudden vision of the bridge overhead, a black span bisecting the star-spun sky, the parabolic arch of the chains perhaps visible, perhaps not. People would stride across the river, an arrow's flight overhead, unaware of this place beneath. Perhaps they would stop and look over the bridge's railings, but they would be too high to see the fish as any but small shadows, supposing they saw them at all, supposing they stopped at all. The Big Ones would be novelties, weird creatures that caused a safe little shiver, like hearing a frightening story late at night.

Perhaps Rasali saw the same thing, for she said suddenly, "Your bridge. It will change all this."

"It must. I am sorry," he said again. "We are not meant to be here, on mist."

"We are not meant to cross this without passing through it. Kit—" Rasali said, as if starting a sentence, and then fell silent. After a moment she began to speak again, her voice low, as if she were speaking to herself. "The soul often hangs in a balance of some sort: tonight, do I lie down in the high fields with Dirk Tanner or not? At the fair, do I buy ribbons or wine? For the new ferry's headboard, do I use camphor or pearwood? Small things, right? A kiss, a ribbon, a grain that coaxes the knife this way or that. They are not, Kit Meinem of Atyar. Our souls wait for our answer, because any answer changes us. This is why I wait to decide what I feel about your bridge. I'm waiting until I know how I will be changed."

"You can never know how things will change you," Kit said.

"If you don't, you have not waited to find out." There was a popping noise barely a stone's throw to starboard. "Quiet."

On they moved. In daylight, Kit knew, the trip took less than an hour; now it seemed much longer. Perhaps it was; he looked up at the stars and thought they had moved, but perhaps not.

His teeth were clenched, as were all his muscles. When he tried to relax them, he realized it was not fear that cramped him, but something else, something outside him. He heard Rasali falter. "No . . ."

He recognized it now, the sound that was not a sound, like the lowest pipes on an organ, a drone so low that he couldn't hear it, one that turned his bones to liquid and his muscles to flaked and rusting iron. His breath labored from his chest in grunts. His head thrummed. Moving as though through honey, he strained his hands to his head, cradling it. He could not see Rasali except as a gloom against the slightly lesser gloom of the mist, but he heard her pant, tiny pain-filled breaths, like an injured dog.

The thrumming in his body pounded at his bones now, dissolving them. He wanted to cry out, but there was no air left in his lungs. He realized suddenly that the layer beneath them was raising itself into a mound. Mist piled at the boat's sides. *I never got to finish the bridge*, he thought. *And I never kissed her*. Did Rasali have any regrets?

The mound roiled and became a hill, which became a mountain obscuring part of the sky. The crest melted into curls of mist, and there was a shape inside, large and dark as night itself, and it slid and followed the collapsing. It seemed still, but he knew that was only because of the size of the thing, that it took ages for its full length to pass. That was all he saw before his eyes slipped shut.

How long he lay there in the bottom of the boat, he didn't know. At some point, he realized he was there; some time later he found he could move again, his bones and muscles back to what they should be. The dog was barking. "Rasali?" he said shakily. "Are we sinking?"

"Kit." Her voice was a thread. "You're still alive. I thought we were dead."

"That was a Big One?"

"I don't know. No one has ever seen one. Maybe it was just a Fairly Large One."

The old joke. Kit choked on a weak laugh.

"Shit," Rasali said in the darkness. "I dropped the oar."

"Now what?" he said.

"I have a spare, but it's going to take longer and we'll land in the wrong place. We'll have to tie off and then walk up to get help."

I'm alive, he did not say. *I can walk a thousand miles tonight.*

It was nearly dawn before they got to Nearside. The two big moons rose just before they landed, a mile south of the dock. The spice traders and their dog went on ahead while Kit and Rasali secured the boat. They walked up together. Halfway home, Valo came down at a dead run.

"I was waiting, and you didn't come—" He was pale and panting. "But they told me, the other passengers, that you made it, and—"

"Valo." Rasali hugged him and held him hard. "We're safe, little one. We're here. It's done."

"I thought . . ." he said.

"I know," she said. "Valo, please, I am so tired. Can you get the *Crossing* up to the dock? I am going to my house, and I will sleep for a day, and I don't care if the Empress herself is tapping her foot, it's going to wait." She released Valo, saluted Kit with a weary smile, and walked up flank of the levee. Kit watched her leave.

The "Imperial seal" was a letter from Atyar, some underling arrogating authority and asking for clarification on a set of numbers Kit had sent—scarcely worth the trip at any time, let alone across mist on a bad night. Kit cursed the capital and Empire and then sent the information, along with a tautly worded paragraph about seals and their appropriate use.

Two days later, he got news that would have brought him across the mist in any case: the caravan carrying the first eyebar and bolts was twelve miles out on the Hoic Mine Road. Kit and his ironmaster Tandreve Smith rode out to meet the wagons as they crept southward, and found them easing down a gradual slope near Oud village. The carts were long and built strong, their contents covered, each pulled by a team of tough-legged oxen with patient expressions. The movement was slow, and drivers walked beside them, singing something unfamiliar to Kit's city-bred ears.

"Ox-tunes. We used to sing these at my aunt's farm," Tandreve said, and sang:

*"Remember last night's dream,
the sweet cold grass, the lonely cows.
You had your bollocks then."*

Tandreve chuckled, and Kit with her.

One of the drivers wandered over as Kit pulled his horse to a stop. Unattended, her team moved forward anyway. "Folks," she said, and nodded. A taciturn woman.

Kit swung down from the saddle. "These are the chains?"

"You're from the bridge?"

"Kit Meinem of Atyar."

The woman nodded again. "Berallit Red-Ox of Ilver. Your smiths are sitting on the tail of the last wagon."

One of the smiths, a rangy man with singed eyebrows, loped forward to meet them, and introduced himself as Jared Toss of Little Hoic. They walked beside the carts as they talked, and he threw aside a tarp to show Kit what they carried: iron eyebars, each a rod ten feet long with eyes at each end. Tandreve walked sideways as she inspected the eyebars; she and Jared soon lost themselves in a technical discussion, while Kit kept them company, leading Tandreve's forgotten horse and his own, con-

tent for the moment to let the masters talk it out. He moved a little forward until he was abreast of the oxen. *Remember last night's dream*, he thought, and then: *I wonder what Rasali dreamt.*

After that night on the mist, Rasali seemed to have no bad days. She took people the day after they arrived, no matter the weather or the mist's character. The tavern keepers grumbled at this a bit, but the decrease in time each visitor stayed in town was made up for by the increase in numbers of serious-eyed men and women sent by firms in Atyar to establish offices in the towns on the river's far side. It made things easier for the bridge, as well, since Kit and others could move back and forth as needed. Kit remained reluctant, more so since the near-miss.

There was enough business for two boats, and Valo volunteered to ferry more often, but Rasali refused the help, allowing him to ferry only when she couldn't prevent it. "The Big Ones don't seem to care about me this winter," she said to him, "but I can't say they would feel the same about tender meat like you." With Kit she was more honest. "If he is to leave ferrying, to go study in the capital maybe, it's best sooner than later. Mist will be dangerous until the last ferry crosses it. And even then, even after your bridge is done."

It was Rasali only who seemed to have this protection; the fishing people had as many problems as in any year. Denis Redboat lost his coracle when it was rammed ("By a Medium-Large One," he laughed in the tavern later: sometimes the oldest jokes were the best), though he was fished out by a nearby boat before he had sunk too deep. The rash was superficial, but his hair grew back only in patches.

Kit sat in the crowded beer garden of The Deer's Heart, watching Rasali and Valo build a little pinewood skiff in the boat yard next door. Valo had called out a greeting when Kit first sat down, and Rasali turned her head to smile at him, but after that they ignored him. Some of the locals stopped by to greet him, and the barman stayed for some time, telling him about the ominous yet unchanging ache in his back; but for most of the afternoon, Kit was alone in the sun, drinking cellar-cool porter and watching the boat take shape.

In the midsummer of the fourth year, it was rare for Kit to have the afternoon of a beautiful day to himself. The anchorages had been finished for some months. So had the rubble-fill ramps that led to the arched passages through each pillar, but the pillars themselves had taken longer, and the granite saddles that would support the chains over the towers had only just been put in place.

They were only slightly behind on Kit's deadlines for most of the materials. More than a thousand of the eyebars and bolts for the chains were laid out in rows, the iron smelling of the linseed oil used to protect them during transit. More were expected in before winter. Close to the ramps were the many fish-skin ropes and cables that would be needed to bring the first chain across the gap. They were irreplaceable, probably the most valuable thing on the work sites, and were treated accordingly, kept in closed tents that reeked.

Kit's high-work specialists were here, too: the men and women who would do the first perilous tasks, mostly experts who had worked on other big spans or the towers of Atyar.

But everything waited on Rasali, and in the meantime, Kit was content to sit and watch her work.

Valo and Rasali were not alone in the boat yard. Rasali had sent to the ferry folk of Ubmie, a hundred miles to the south, and they had arrived a few days before: a woman and her cousin, Chell and Lan Crosser. The strangers had the same massive shoulders

and good looks the Ferrys had, but they shared a faraway expression of their own; the river was broader at Ubmie, deeper, so perhaps death was closer to them. Kit wondered what they thought of his task—the bridge would cut into ferry trade for many hundreds of miles on either side, and Ubmie had been reviewed as a possible site for the bridge—but they must not have resented it or they would not be here.

Everything waited on the ferry folk: the next major task was to bring the lines across the river to connect the piers—fabricating the chains required temporary cables and catwalks to be there first—but this could not be rushed: Rasali, Valo, and the Crossers all needed to feel at the same time that it was safe to cross. Kit tried not to be impatient, and in any case he had plenty to do—items to add to lists, formal reports and polite updates to send to the many interested parties in Atyar and in Triple, instructions to pass on to the rope makers, the masons, the road-builders, the exchequer. And Jenner: Kit had written to the capital and the Department of Roads was offering Jenner the lead on the second bridge across the river, to be built a few hundred miles to the north. Kit was to deliver the cartel the next time they were on the same side, but he was grateful the officials had agreed to leave Jenner with him until the first chain on this bridge was in place.

He pushed all this from his mind. *Later*, he said to the things, half-apologetically; *I'll deal with you later. For now, just let me sit in the sun and watch other people work.*

The sun slanted peach-gold through the oak's leaves before Rasali and Valo finished for the day. The skiff was finished, an elegant tiny curve of pale wood and dying sunlight. Kit leaned against the fence as they threw a cup of water over its bow and then drew it into the shadows of the boathouse. Valo took off at a run—*so much energy, even after a long day*; ah, youth—as Rasali walked to the fence and leaned on it from her side.

"It's beautiful," he said.

She rolled her neck. "I know. We make good boats. Are you hungry? Your busy afternoon must have raised an appetite."

He had to laugh. "We finished the pillar—laid the capstone this morning. *I am hungry.*"

"Come on, then. Thalla will feed us all."

Dinner was simple. The Deer's Heart was better known for its beers than its foods, but the stew Thalla served was savory with chervil, and thick enough to stand a spoon in. Valo had friends to be with, so they ate with Chell and Lan, who were as light-hearted as Rasali. At dusk, the Crossers left to explore the Nearside taverns, leaving Kit and Rasali to watch heat lightning in the west. The air was thick and warm, soft as wool on their skin.

"You never come up to the work sites on either side," Kit said suddenly, after a comfortable, slightly drunken silence. He inspected his earthenware mug, empty except for the smell of yeast.

Rasali had given up on the benches and sat instead on one of the garden tables. She leaned back until she lay supine, face toward the sky. "I've been busy. Perhaps you noticed?"

"It's more than that. Everyone finds time, here and there. And you used to."

She laughed. "I did, didn't I? I just haven't seen the point, lately. The bridge changes everything, but I don't see yet how it changes me. So I wait until it's time. Perhaps it's like the mist."

"What about now?"

She rolled her head until her cheek lay against the rough wood of the tabletop: looking at him, he could tell, though her eyes were hidden in shadows. What did she see, he wondered: what was she hoping to see? It pleased him, but made him nervous.

"Come to the tower, now, tonight," he said. "Soon everything changes. We pull the ropes across, and make the chains, and hang the supports, and lay the road—every-

thing changes then. It stops being a project and becomes a bridge, a road. But tonight, it's still just two towers and a bunch of plans. Rasali, climb it with me. I can't describe what it's like up there—the wind, the sky all around you, the river." He flushed at the urgency in his voice. When she remained silent, he added, "You change whether you wait for it or not."

"There's lightning," she said.

"It runs from cloud to cloud," he said. "Not to earth."

"Heat lightning." She sat up suddenly, nodded. "So show me this place."

The work site was abandoned. The sky overhead had filled with clouds lit from within by the lightning, which was worse than no light at all, since it ruined their night vision. They staggered across the site, trying to plan their paths in the moments of light, doggedly moving through the darkness. "Shit," Rasali said suddenly in the darkness, then: "Tripped over something or other." Kit found himself laughing for no apparent reason.

They took the internal stairs instead of the scaffold that still leaned against the pillar's north wall. Kit knew them thoroughly, knew every irregular turn and riser; he counted them aloud to Rasali as he led her by the hand. They reached one hundred and ninety four before they saw light from a flash of lightning overhead, two hundred and eighteen when they finally stepped onto the roof, gasping for air.

They were not alone. A woman squealed; she and the man with her grabbed clothes and blankets and bolted with their lamp, naked and laughing down the stairs. Rasali said with satisfaction, "Sera Oakfield. That was Erno Bridgeman with her."

"He took his name from the bridge?" Kit asked, but Rasali said only, "Oh," in a child's voice. Silent lightning painted the sky over her head in sudden strokes of purple-white: layers of cloud glowing or dark.

"It's so much closer." She looked about her, walked to the edge and looked down at Nearside. Dull gold light poured from doors open to the heavy air. Kit stayed where he was, content to watch her. The light (when there was light) was shadowless, and her face looked young and full of wonder. After a time, she walked to his side.

They said nothing, only kissed and then made love in a nest of their discarded clothes. Kit felt the stone of his bridge against his knees, his back, still warm as skin from the day's heat. Rasali was softer than the rocks and tasted sweet.

A feeling he could not have described cracked open his chest, his throat, his belly. It had been a long time since he had been with a woman, not met his own needs; he had nearly forgotten the delight of it, the sharp sweet shock of his release, the rocking ocean of hers. Even their awkwardness made him glad, because it held in it the possibility of doing this again, and better.

When they were done, they talked. "You know my goal, to build this bridge," Kit looked down at her face, there and gone, in the flickering of the lightning. "But I do not know yours."

Rasali laughed softly. "Yet you have seen me succeed a thousand times, and fail a few. I wish to live well, each day."

"That's not a goal," Kit said.

"Why? Because it's not yours? Which is better, Kit Meinem of Atyar? A single great victory, or a thousand small ones?" And then: "Tomorrow," Rasali said. "We will take the rope across tomorrow."

"You're sure?" Kit asked.

"That's a strange statement coming from you. The bridge is all about crossing being a certainty, yes? Like the sun coming up each morning? We agreed this afternoon. It's time."

* * *

Dawn came early, with the innkeeper's preemptory rap on the door. Kit woke disoriented, tangled in the sheets of his little cupboard bed. Afterward he and Rasali had come down from the pillar, Rasali to sleep and Kit to do everything that needed to happen before the rope was brought across, all in the few hours left of the night. His skin smelled of Rasali, but, stunned with lack of sleep, he had trouble believing their lovemaking had been real. But there was stone dust ground into his skin; he smiled and, though it was high summer, sang a spring song from Atyar as he quickly washed and dressed. He drank a bowl filled with broth in the taproom. It was tangy, lukewarm. A single small water-fish stared up at him from a salted eye. Kit left the fish, and left the inn.

The clouds and the lightning were gone; early as it was the sky was already pale and hot. The news was everywhere, and the entire town, or so it seemed, drifted with Kit to the work site, and then flowed over the levee and down to the bank.

The river was a blinding creamy ribbon high between the two banks, looking just as it had the first time he had seen it, and for a minute he felt dislocated in time. High mist was seen as a good omen, and though he did not believe in omens, he was nevertheless glad. There was a crowd collected on the Farside levee as well, though he couldn't see details, only the movement like gnats in the sky at dusk. The signal towers' flags hung limp against the hot blue-white sky.

Kit walked down to Rasali's boat, nearly hidden in its own tight circle of watchers. As Kit approached, Valo called, "Hey, Kit!" Rasali looked up. Her smile was like welcome shade on a bright day. The circle opened to accept him.

"Greetings, Valo Ferry of Farside, Rasali Ferry of Farside," he said. When he was close enough, he clasped Rasali's hands in his own, loving their warmth despite the day's heat.

"Kit." She kissed his mouth, to a handful of muffled hoots and cheers from the bystanders and a surprised noise from Valo. She tasted like chicory.

Daell Cabler nodded absently to Kit. She was the lead rope maker. Now she, her husband Stivvan, and the journeymen and masters they had drawn to them, were inspecting the hundreds of fathoms of plaited fish-skin cord, loading them without twists onto spools three feet across, and loading those onto a wooden frame bolted to the *Tranquil Crossing*.

The rope was thin, not much more than a cord, narrower than Kit's smallest finger. It looked fragile, nothing like strong enough to carry its own weight for a quarter of a mile, though the tests said otherwise.

Several of the stronger people from the bridge handed down small heavy crates to Valo and Chell Crosser in the bow. Silverwork from Hedeclin, and copper in bricks: the ferry was to be weighted somewhat forward, which would make the first part of the crossing more difficult but should help with the end of it, as the cord paid out and took on weight from the mist.

"—we think, anyway," Valo had said, two months back when he and Rasali had discussed the plan with Kit. "But we don't know; no one's done this before." Kit had nodded, and not for the first time wished that the river had been a little less broad. Upriver, perhaps; but no, this had been the only option. He did write to an old classmate back in Atyar, a woman who now taught the calculus, and presented their solution. His friend had written back to say that it looked as though it ought to work, but that she knew little of mist.

One end of the rope snaked along the ground and up the levee. Though it would do no harm, no one touched the rope, or even approached it, but left a narrow lane for it and stepped only carefully over it. Now Daell and Stivvan Cabler followed the lane back, up, and over the levee: checking the rope and temporary anchor at the near-side pillar's base.

There was a wait. People sat on the grass, or walked back to watch the Cablers.

Someone brought cool broth and small beer from the fishers' tavern. Valo and Rasali and the two strangers were remote, focused already on what came next.

And for himself? Kit was wound up, but it wouldn't do to show anything but a calm confident front. He walked among the watchers, exchanged words or a smile with each of them. He knew them all by now, even the children.

It was nearly midmorning before Daell and Stivvan returned. The ferryfolk took their positions, two to each side, far enough apart that they could pull on different rhythms. Kit was useless freight until they got to the other side, so he sat at the bow of the *Crossing*, where his weight might do some good. Daell stumbled as she was helped into the boat's stern: she would monitor the rope but, as she told them all, she was nervous; she had never crossed the mist before this. "I think I'll wait 'til the catwalks go up before I return," she added. "Stivvan can sleep without me 'til then."

"Ready, Kit?" Rasali called forward.

"Yes," he said.

"Daell? Lan? Chell? Valo?" Assent all around.

"An historic moment," Valo announced: "The day the mist was bridged."

"Make yourself useful, boy," Rasali said. "Prepare to scull."

"Right," Valo said.

"Push us off," she said to the people on the dock. A cheer went up.

The dock and all the noises behind them disappeared almost immediately. The ferryfolk had been right that it was a good day for such an undertaking; the mist was a smooth series of ripples no taller than a man, and so thick that the *Crossing* rode high despite the extra weight and drag. It was the gentlest he had ever seen the river.

Kit's eyes ached from the brightness. "It will work?" Kit said, meaning the rope and their trip across the mist and the bridge itself—a question rather than a statement; unable to help himself, though he had worked calculations himself, had Daell and Stivvan and Valo and a specialist in Atyar all double-check them, though it was a child's question. Isolated in the mist, even competence seemed tentative.

"Yes," Daell Cabler said, from aft.

The rowers said little. At one point, Rasali murmured into the deadened air, "To the right," and Valo and Lan Crosser changed their stroke to avoid a gentle mound a few feet high directly in their path. Mostly the *Crossing* slid steadily across the regular swells. Unlike his other trips, Kit saw no dark shapes in the mist, large or small.

There was nothing he could do to help, so Kit watched Rasali scull in the blazing sun. The work got harder as the rope spooled out until she and the others panted with each breath. Shining with sweat, her skin was nearly as bright as the mist in the sunlight. He wondered how she could bear the light without burning. Her face looked solemn, intent on the eastern shore. They could not see the dock, but the levee was scattered with Farsiders, waiting for the work they would do when the ferry landed. Her eyes were alight with reflections from the mist. Then he recognized the expression, the light. They were not concern, or reflections: they were joy.

How will she bear it, he thought suddenly, when there is no more ferrying to be done? He had known that she loved what she did, but he had never realized just how much. He felt as though he had been kicked in the stomach. What would it do to her? His bridge would destroy this thing that she loved, that gave her name. How could he not have thought of that? "Rasali," he said, unable to stay silent.

"Not now," she said. The rowers panted as they dug in.

"It's like . . . pulling through dirt," Valo gasped.

"Quiet," Rasali snapped, and then they were silent except for their laboring breath. Kit's own muscles knotted sympathetically. Foot by foot, the ferry heaved forward. At some point they were close enough to the Farside upper dock that someone could

throw a rope to Kit and at last he could do something, however inadequate; he took the rope and pulled. The rowers dug in for their final strokes, and the boat slid up beside the dock. People swarmed aboard, securing the boat to the dock, the rope to a temporary anchor onshore.

Released, the Ferrys and the Crossers embraced, laughing a little dizzily. They walked up the levee toward Farside town and did not look back.

Kit left the ferry to join Jenner Ellar.

It was hard work. The rope's end had to be brought over an oiled stone saddle on the levee and down to a temporary anchor and capstan at the Farside pillar's base, a task that involved driving a team of oxen through the gap Jenner had cut into the levee: a risk, but one that had to be taken.

More oxen were harnessed to the capstan. Daell Cabler was still pale and shaking from the crossing, but after a glass of something cool and dark, she and her Farside counterparts could walk the rope to look for any new weak spots, and found none. Jenner stayed at the capstan, but Daell and Kit returned to the temporary saddle in the levee, the notch polished like glass and gleaming with oil.

The rope was released from the dockside anchor. The rope over the saddle whined as it took the load and flattened, and there was a deep pinging noise as it swung out to make a single straight line, down from the saddle, down into the mist. The oxen at the capstan dug in.

The next hours were the tensest of Kit's life. For a time, the rope did not appear to change. The capstan moaned and clicked, and at last the rope slid by inches, by feet, through the saddle. He could do nothing but watch and yet again rework all the calculations in his mind. He did not see Rasali, but Valo came up after a time to watch the progress. Answering his questions settled Kit's nerves. The calculations were correct. He had done this before. He was suddenly starved and voraciously ate the food that Valo had brought for him. How long had it been since the broth at The Fish? Hours; most of a day.

The oxen puffed and grunted, and were replaced with new teams. Even lubricated and with leather sleeves, the rope moved reluctantly across the saddle, but it did move. And then the pressure started to ease and the rope passed faster over the saddle. The sun was westering when at last the rope lifted free. By dusk, the rope was sixty feet above the mist, stretched humming-tight between the Farside and Near-side levees and the temporary anchors.

Just before dark, Kit saw the flags go up on the signal tower: *secure*.

Kit worked on and then seconded projects for five years after he left University. His father knew men and women at the higher levels in the Department of Roads, and his old tutor, Skossa Timt, knew more, so many were high-profile works, but he loved all of them, even his first lead, the little toll gate where the boy, Duar, had died.

All public work—drainage schemes, roadwork, amphitheatres, public squares, sewers, alleys, and mews—was alchemy. It took the invisible patterns that people made as they lived and turned them into real things, stone and brick and wood and space. Kit built things that moved people through the invisible architecture that was his mind, and his notion—and Empire's notion—of how their lives could be better.

The first major project he led was a replacement for a collapsed bridge in the Four Peaks region north of Atyar. The original had also been a chain suspension bridge but much smaller than the mist bridge, crossing only a hundred yards, its pillars only forty feet high. With maintenance, it had survived heavy use for three centuries, shuddering under the carts that brought quicksilver ore down to the smelting village of Oncalion; but after the heavy snowfalls of what was subsequently called the Wolf

Winter, one of the gorge's walls collapsed, taking the north pillar with it and leaving nowhere stable to rebuild. It was easier to start over, two hundred yards upstream.

The people of Oncalion were not genial. Hard work made for hard men and women. There was a grim, desperate edge to their willingness to labor on the bridge, because their livelihood and their lives were dependent on the mine. They had to be stopped at the end of each day or, dangerous as it was, they would work through moonlit nights.

But it was lonely work, even for Kit who did not mind solitude; and when the snows of the first winter brought a halt to construction, he returned with some relief to Atyar, to stay with his father. Davell Meinem was old now. His memory was weakening though still strong enough; and he spent his days constructing a vast and fabulous public maze of dry-laid stones brought from all over Empire: his final project, he said to Kit, an accurate prophecy. Skossa Timt had died during the hard cold of the Wolf Winter, but many of his classmates were in the capital. Kit spent evenings with them, attended lectures and concerts, entering for the season into a casual relationship with an architect who specialized in waterworks.

Kit returned to the site at Oncalion as soon as the roads cleared. In his absence, through the snows and melt-off, the people of Oncalion had continued to work, laying course after course of stone in the bitter cold. The work had to be redone.

The second summer, they worked every day and moonlit nights, and Kit worked beside them.

Kit counted the bridge as a failure, although it was coming in barely over budget and only a couple of months late, and no one had died. It was an ugly design; the people of Oncalion had worked hard but joylessly; and there was all his dissatisfaction and guilt about the work that had to be redone.

Perhaps there was something in the tone of his letters to his father, for there came a day in early autumn that Davell Meinem arrived in Oncalion, riding a sturdy mountain horse and accompanied by a journeyman who vanished immediately into one of the village's three taverns. It was mid-afternoon.

"I want to see this bridge of yours," Davell said. He looked weary, but straight-backed as ever. "Show it to me."

"We'll go tomorrow," Kit said. "You must be tired."

"Now," Davell said.

They walked up from the village together: a cool day, and bright, though the road was overshadowed with pines and fir trees. Basalt outcroppings were stained dark green and black with lichens. His father moved slowly, pausing often for breath. They met a steady trickle of local people leading heavy-laden ponies. The roadbed across the bridge wasn't quite complete, but ponies could cross carrying ore in baskets. Oncalion was already smelting these first small loads.

At the bridge, Davell asked the same questions he had asked when Kit was a child playing on his work sites. Kit found himself responding as he had so many years before, eager to explain—or excuse—each decision; and always, always the ponies passing.

They walked down to the older site. The pillar had been gutted for stones, so all that was left was rubble; but it gave them a good view of the new bridge: the boxy pillars; the great parabolic curve of the main chains; the thick vertical suspender chains; the slightly sprung arch of the bulky roadbed. It looked as clumsy as a suspension bridge ever could. Yet another pony crossed, led by a woman singing something in the local dialect.

"It's a good bridge," Davell said at last.

Kit shook his head. His father, who had been known for his sharp tongue on the work sites though never to his son, said, "A bridge is a means to an end. It only matters because of what it does. Leads from *here* to *there*. If you do your work right, they

won't notice it, any more than you notice where quicksilver comes from, most times. It's a good bridge because they are already using it. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Kit."

It was a big party, that night. The Farsiders (and, Kit knew, the Nearsiders) drank and danced under the shadow of their bridge-to-be. Torchlight and firelight touched the stones of the tower base and anchorage, giving them mass and meaning, but above their light the tower was a black outline, the absence of stars. More torches outlined the tower's top, and they seemed no more than gold stars among the colder ones.

Kit walked among them. Everyone smiled or waved and offered to stand him drinks, but no one spoke much with him. It was as if the lifting of the cable had separated him from them. The immense towers had not done this; he had still been one of them, to some degree at least—the instigator of great labors, but still, one of them. But now, for tonight anyway, he was the man who bridged the mist. He had not felt so lonely since his first day here. Even Loreh Tanner's death had not severed him so completely from their world.

On every project, there was a day like this. It was possible that the distance came from him, he realized suddenly. He came to a place and built something, passing through the lives of people for a few months or years. He was staying longer this time because of the size of the project, but in the end he would leave. He always left, after he had changed lives in incalculable ways. A road through dangerous terrain or a bridge across mist saved lives and increased trade, but it always changed the world, as well. It was his job to make a thing and then leave to make the next one, but it was also his preference, not to remain and see what he had made. What would Nearside and Farside look like in ten years, in fifty? He had never returned to a previous site.

It was harder this time, or perhaps just different. Perhaps *he* was different. He had allowed himself to belong to the country on either side of the bridge; to have more was to have more to miss when it was taken away.

Rasali—what would her life look like?

Valo danced by, his arm around a woman half again as tall as he—Rica Bridger—and Kit caught his arm. "Where is Rasali?" he shouted, then, knowing he could not be heard over the noise of drums and pipes, mouthed: *Rasali*. He didn't hear what Valo said but followed his pointing hand.

Rasali was alone, flat on her back on the river side of the levee, looking up. There were no moons, so the Sky Mist hung close overhead, a river of stars that poured north to south like the river itself. Kit knelt a few feet away. "Rasali Ferry of Farside?"

Her teeth flashed in the dark. "Kit Meinem of Atyar."

He lay beside her. The grass was like bad straw, coarse against his back and neck. Without looking at him, she passed a jar of something. Its taste was strong as tar, and Kit gaped for a moment at the bite of it.

"I did not mean—" he started, but trailed off, unsure how to continue.

"Yes," she said, and he knew she had heard the words he didn't say. Her voice contained a shrug. "Many people born into a Ferry family never cross the mist."

"But you—" He stopped, felt carefully for his words. "Maybe others don't, but you do. And I think maybe you must do so."

"Just as you must build," she said softly. "That's clever of you, to realize that."

"And there will be no need after this, will there? Not on boats, anyway. We'll still need fish-skin, so the fisherfolk will still be out, but they—"

"—stay close to shore," she said.

"And you?" he asked.

"I don't know, Kit. Days come, days go. I go onto the mist or I don't. I live or I don't. There is no certainty, but there never is."

"It doesn't distress you?"

"Of course it does. I love and I hate this bridge of yours. I will pine for the mist, for the need to cross it. But I do not want to be part of a family that all die young, without even a corpse for the burning. If I have a child, she will not need to make the decision I did: to cross the mist and die, or to stay safe on one side of the world and never see the other. She will lose something. She will gain something else."

"Do you hate me?" he said finally, afraid of the answer, afraid of any answer she might give.

"No. Oh, no." She rolled over to him and kissed his mouth, and Kit could not say if the salt he tasted was from her tears or his own.

The autumn was spent getting the chains across the river. In the days after the crossing, the rope was linked to another, and then pulled back the way it had come, coupled now; and then there were two ropes in parallel courses. It was tricky work, requiring careful communications through the signal towers, but it was completed without event; and Kit could at last get a good night's sleep. To break the rope would have been to start anew with the long difficult crossing. Over the next days, each rope was replaced with fish-skin cable strong enough to take the weight of the chains until they were secured.

The cables were hoisted to the tops of the pillars, to prefigure the path one of the eight chains would take: secured with heavy pins set in protected slots in the anchorages and then straight sharp lines to the saddles on the pillars and, two hundred feet above the mist, the long perfect catenary. A catwalk was suspended from the cables. For the first time, people could cross the mist without the boats, though few chose to do so except for the high-workers from the capital and the coast: a hundred men and women so strong and graceful that they seemed another species, and kept mostly to themselves. They were directed by a woman Kit had worked with before, Feinlin; the high-workers took no surnames. Something about Feinlin reminded him of Rasali.

The weather grew colder and the days shorter, and Kit pushed hard to have the first two chains across before the winter rains began. There would be no heavy work once the ground got too wet to give sturdy purchase to the teams, and, calculations to the contrary, Kit could not quite trust that cables, even fish-skin cables, would survive the weight of those immense arcs through an entire winter—or that a Big One would not take one down in the unthinking throes of some winter storm.

The eyebars that would make up the chain were each ten feet long and required considerable manhandling to be linked with the bolts, each larger than a man's forearm. The links became a chain, even more cumbersome. Winches pulled the chain's end up to the saddles, and out onto the catwalk.

After this, the work became even more difficult and painstaking. Feinlin and her people moved individual eyebars and pins out onto the catwalks and joined them in situ; a backbreaking, dangerous task that had to be exactly synchronized with the work on the other side of the river so that the cable would not be stressed.

Most nights Kit worked into the darkness. When the moons were bright enough, he, the high-workers, and the bridgewrights would work in shifts, day and night.

He crossed the mist six more times that fall. The high-workers disliked having people on the catwalks, but he was the architect, after all, so he crossed once that way, struggling with vertigo. After that, he preferred the ferries. When he crossed once with Valo, they talked exclusively about the bridge—Valo had decided to stay until the bridge was complete and the ferries finished; but his mind was already full of the capital—but the other times, when it was Rasali, they were silent, listening to the hiss of the V-shaped scull moving in the mist. His fear of the mist decreased with each day they came closer to the bridge's completion, though he couldn't say why this was.

When Kit did not work through the night and Rasali was on the same side of the

mist, they spent their nights together, sometimes making love, at other times content to share drinks or play ninepins in The Deer's Heart's garden, at which Kit's proficiency surprised everyone, including himself. He and Rasali did not talk again about what she would do when the bridge was complete—or what he would do, for that matter.

The hard work was worth it. It was still warm enough that the iron didn't freeze the high-workers' hands on the day they placed the final bolt. The first chain was complete.

Though work had slowed through the winter, the second and third chains were in place by spring, and the others were completed by the end of the summer.

With the heavy work done, some of the workers returned to their home-places. More than half had taken the name Bridger or something similar. "We have changed things," Kit said to Jenner on one of his Nearside visits, just before Jenner left for his new work. "No," Jenner said. "You have changed things." Kit did not respond, but held this close, and thought of it sometimes with mingled pride and fear.

The workers who remained were high-men and -women, people who did not mind crawling about on the suspension chains securing the support ropes. For the last two years, the rope makers for two hundred miles up and downstream from the bridge had been twisting, cutting, and looping and reweaving the ends of the fish-skin cables that would support the road deck, each crate marked with the suspender's position in the bridge. The cartons stood in carefully sorted, labeled towers in the field that had once been full of sheep.

Kit's work was now all paperwork, it seemed—so many invoices, so many reports for the capital—but he managed every day to watch the high-workers, their efficient motions. Sometimes he climbed to the tops of the pillars and looked down into the mist, and saw Rasali's or Valo's ferry, an elegant narrow shape half-hidden in tendrils of blazing white mist or pale gray fog.

Kit lost one more worker, Tommer Bullkeeper, who climbed out onto the catwalk for a drunken bet and fell, with a maniacal cry that changed into unbalanced laughter as he vanished into the mist. His wife wept in mixed anger and grief, and the townspeople wore ash-color, and the bridge continued. Rasali held Kit when he cried in his room at The Red Lurcher. "Never mind," she said. "Tommer was a good person: a drunk, but good to his sons and his wife, careful with animals. People have always died. The bridge doesn't change that."

The towns changed shape as Kit watched. Commercial envoys from every direction gathered; many stayed in inns and homes, but some built small houses, shops, and warehouses. Many used the ferries, and it became common for these businessmen and women to tip Rasali or Valo lavishly—"in hopes I never ride with you again," they would say. Valo laughed and spent this money buying beer for his friends; the letter had come from University that he could begin his studies with the winter term, and he had many farewells to make. Rasali told no one, not even Kit, what she planned to do with hers.

Beginning in the spring of the project's fifth year, they attached the road deck. Wood planks wide enough for oxen two abreast were nailed together across the iron struts that gave stability. The bridge was made of several hundred sections, constructed on the worksites and then hauled out by workers. Each segment had farther to go before being placed and secured. The two towns celebrated all night the first time a Nearsider shouted from her side of the bridge, and was saluted by Farsider cheers. In the lengthening evenings, it became a pastime for people to walk onto the bridge and lie belly-down at its end, watching the mist so far below them. Sometimes dark shapes moved within it, but no one saw anything big enough to be a Big One. A few heedless locals dropped heavy stones from above to watch the mist

twist away, opening holes into its depths; but their neighbors stopped them: "It's not respectful," one said; and, "Do you want to piss them off?" said another.

Kit asked her, but Rasali never walked out with him. "I see enough from the river," she said.

Kit was in Nearside, in his room in The Fish. He had lived in this room for five years, and it looked it: plans and timetables pinned to the walls. The chair by the fire was heaped with clothes, books, a length of red silk he had seen at a fair and could not resist; it had been years since he'd sat there. The plans in his folio and on the oversized table had been replaced with waybills and receipts for materials, payrolls, copies of correspondence between Kit and his sponsors in the government. The window was open, and Kit sat on the cupboard bed, watching a bee feel its way through the sun-filled air. He'd left half a pear on the table, and he was waiting to see if the bee would find it, and thinking about the little hexagonal cells of a beehive, whether they were stronger than squares were, and how he might test this.

Feet ran along the corridor. His door flew open. Rasali stood there blinking in the light, which was so golden that Kit didn't at first notice how pale she was, or the tears on her face. "What—" he said, as he swung off his bed. He came toward her.

"Valo," she said. "*The Pearlfinder*."

He held her. The bee left, then the sun, and still he held her as she rocked silently on the bed. Only when the square of sky in the window faded to purple, and the little moon's crescent eased across it, did she speak. "Ah," she said, a sigh like a gasp. "I am so tired." She fell asleep, as quickly as that, with tears still wet on her face. Kit slipped from the room.

The taproom was crowded, filled with ash-gray clothes, with soft voices and occasional sobs. Kit wondered for a moment if everyone had a set of mourning clothes always at hand, and what this meant about them.

Brana Keep saw Kit in the doorway, and came from behind the bar to speak with him. "How is she?" she said.

"Not good. I think she's asleep right now," Kit said. "Can you give me some food for her, something to drink?"

Brana nodded, spoke to her daughter Lixa as she passed into the back, then returned. "How are you doing, Kit? You saw a fair amount of Valo yourself."

"Yes," Kit said. Valo chasing the children through the field of stones, Valo laughing at the top of a tower, Valo serious-eyed, with a handbook of calculus in the shade of a half-built fishing boat. "What happened? She hasn't said anything yet."

Brana gestured. "What can be said? Signal flags said he was going to cross just after midday, but he never came. When we signaled over, they said he had left when they first signaled."

"Could he be alive?" Kit asked, remembering the night that he and Rasali had lost the big scull, the extra hours it had taken for the crossing. "He might have broken the scull, landed somewhere downriver."

"No," Brana said. "I know, that's what we wanted to hope. Maybe we would have believed it for a while before. But Asa, one of the strangers, the high-workers; she was working overhead and heard the boat capsize, heard him cry out. She couldn't see anything, and didn't know what she had heard until we figured it out."

"Three more months," Kit said, mostly to himself. He saw Brana looking at him, so he clarified: "Three more months. The bridge would have been done. This wouldn't have happened."

"This was today," Brana said, "not three months from now. People die when they die; we grieve and move on, Kit. You've been with us long enough to understand how we see these things. Here's the tray."

* * *

When Kit returned with the tray, Rasali was still asleep. He watched her in the dark room, unwilling to light more than the single lamp he'd carried up with him. *People die when they die.* But he could not stop thinking about the bridge, its deck nearly finished. *Another three months. Another month.*

When she awakened, there was a moment when she smiled at him, her face weary but calm. Then she remembered and her face tightened and she started crying again. When she was done, Kit got her to eat some bread and fish and cheese, and drink some watered wine. She did so obediently, like a child. When she was finished, she lay back against him, her matted hair pushing up into his mouth.

"How can he be gone?"

"I'm so sorry," Kit said. "The bridge was so close to finished. Three more months, and this wouldn't have—"

She pulled away. "What? Wouldn't have happened? Wouldn't have *had* to happen?" She stood and faced him. "His death would have been unnecessary?"

"I—" Kit began, but she interrupted him, new tears streaking her face.

"He *died*, Kit. It wasn't necessary, it wasn't irrelevant, it wasn't anything except the way things are. But he's gone, and I'm not, and *now* what do I do, Kit? I lost my father and my aunt and my sister and my brother and my brother's son, and now I lose the mist when the bridge's done, and then what? What am I then? Who are the Ferry people then?"

Kit knew the answer: however she changed, she would still be Rasali; her people would still be strong and clever and beautiful; the mist would still be there, and the Big Ones. But she wouldn't be able to hear these words, not yet, not for months, maybe. So he held her, and let his own tears slip down his face, and tried not to think.

The fairs to celebrate the opening of the bridge started days before midsummer, the official date. Representatives of Empire from Atyar polished their speeches and waited impatiently in their suite of tents, planted on hurriedly cleaned-up fields near (but not too near) Nearside. The town had bled northward until it surrounded the west pillar of the bridge. The land that had once been sheep-pasture at the foot of the pillar was crowded with fair-tents and temporary booths, cheek by jowl with more permanent shops of wood and stone, selling food and space for sleeping and the sorts of products a traveler might find herself in need of. Kit was proud of the streets; he had organized construction of the crosshatch of sturdy cobblestones, as something to do while he waited through the bridge's final year. The new wells had been a project of Jenner's, planned from the very beginning, but Kit had seen them completed. Kit had just received a letter from Jenner, with news of his new bridge up in the Keitche mountains: on schedule; a happy work site.

Kit walked alone through the fair, which had splashed up the levee and along its ridge. A few people, townspeople and workers, greeted him; but others only pointed him out to their friends (*the man who built the bridge; see there, that short, dark man*); and still others ignored him completely, just another stranger in a crowd of strangers. When he had first come to build the bridge everyone in Nearside knew everyone else, local or visitor. He felt solitude settling around him again, the loneliness of coming to a strange place and building something and then leaving. The people of Nearside were moving forward into this new world he had built, the world of a bridge across the mist, but he was not going with them.

He wondered what Rasali was doing, over in Farside, and wished he could see her. They had not spoken since the days after Valo's death, except once for a few minutes, when he had come upon her at The Bitch. She had been withdrawn though not hostile, and he had felt unbalanced and not sought her out since.

Now, at the end of his great labor, he longed to see her. When would she cross next? He laughed. He of all people should know better: *five minutes' walk*.

The bridge was not yet open, but Kit was the architect; the guards at the toll booth only nodded when he asked to pass, and lifted the gate for him. A few people noticed and gestured as he climbed. When Uni Mason (hands filled with ribbons) shouted something he could not hear clearly, Kit smiled and waved and walked on.

He had crossed the bridge before this. The first stage of building the heavy oak frames that underlay the roadbed had been a narrow strip of planking that led from one shore to the other. Nearly every worker had found some excuse for crossing it at least once before Empire had sent people to the tollgates. Swallowing his fear of the height, Kit himself had crossed it nearly every day for the last two months.

This was different. It was no longer his bridge, but belonged to Empire and to the people of Near- and Farside. He saw it with the eyes of a stranger.

The stone ramp was a quarter-mile long, inclined gradually for carts. Kit hiked up, and the noises dropped behind and below him. The barriers that would keep animals (and people) from seeing the drop-off to either side were not yet complete: there were always things left unfinished at a bridge's opening, afterthoughts and additions. Ahead of him, the bridge was a series of perfect dark lines and arcs.

The ramp widened as it approached the pillar, and offered enough space for a cart to carefully turn onto the bridge itself. The bed of the span was barely wide enough for a cart with two oxen abreast, so Nearside and Farside would have to take turns sending wagons across. *For now*, Kit thought: *Later they can widen it, or build another. They*: it would be someone else.

The sky was overcast with high tin-colored clouds, their metallic sheen reflected in the mist below Kit. There were no railings, only fish-skin ropes strung between the suspension cables that led up to the chain. Oxen and horses wouldn't like that, or the hollow sound their feet would make on the boards. Kit watched the deck roll before him in the breeze, which was constant from the southwest. The roll wasn't so bad in this wind, but perhaps they should add an iron parapet or more trusses, to lessen the twisting and make crossing more comfortable. Empire had sent a new engineer, to take care of any final projects: Jeje Tesanthe. He would mention it to her.

Kit walked to one side so that he could look down. Sound dropped off behind him, deadened as it always was by the mist, and he could almost imagine that he was alone. It was several hundred feet down, but there was nothing to give scale to the coiling field of hammered metal below him. Deep in the mist he saw shadows that might have been a Big One or something smaller or a thickening of the mist, and then, his eyes learning what to look for, he saw more of the shadows, as if a school of fish were down there. One separated and darkened as it rose in the mist until it exposed its back almost immediately below Kit.

It was dark and knobby, shiny with moisture, flat as a skate; and it went on forever—thirty feet long perhaps, or forty, twisting as it rose to expose its underside, or what he thought might be its underside. As Kit watched, the mist curled back from a flexing scaled wing of sorts; and then a patch that might have been a single eye or a field of eyes, or something altogether different; and then a mouth like the arc of the suspension chains. The mouth gaped open to show another arc, a curve of gum or cartilage or something else. The creature rolled and then sank and became a shadow, and then nothing as the mist closed over it and settled.

Kit had stopped walking when he saw it. He forced himself to move forward again. A Big One, or perhaps just a Medium-Large One; at this height it hadn't seemed so big, or so frightening. Kit was surprised at the sadness he felt.

Farside was crammed with color and fairings, as well, but Kit could not find Rasali anywhere. He bought a tankard of rye beer, and went to find some place alone.

* * *

Once it became dark and the imperial representatives were safely tucked away for the night, the guards relaxed the rules and let their friends (and then any of the locals) on the bridge to look around them. People who had worked on the bridge had papers to cross without charge for the rest of their lives, but many others had watched it grow, and now they charmed or bribed or begged their way onto their bridge. Torches were forbidden because of the oil that protected the fish-skin ropes, but covered lamps were permitted, and from his place on the levee, Kit watched the lights move along the bridge, there and then hidden by the support ropes and deck, dim and inconstant as fireflies.

"Kit Meinem of Atyar."

Kit stood and turned to the voice behind him. "Rasali Ferry of Farside." She wore blue and white, and her feet were bare. She had pulled back her dark hair with a ribbon and her pale shoulders gleamed. She glowed under the moonlight like mist. He thought of touching her, kissing her; but they had not spoken since just after Valo's death.

She stepped forward and took the mug from his hand, drank the lukewarm beer, and just like that, the world righted itself. He closed his eyes and let the feeling wash over him.

He took her hand, and they sat on the cold grass, and looked out across the river. The bridge was a black net of arcs and lines, and behind it was the mist glowing blue-white in the light of the moons. After a moment, he asked, "Are you still Rasali Ferry, or will you take a new name?"

"I expect I'll take a new one." She half-turned in his arms so that he could see her face, her pale eyes. "And you? Are you still Kit Meinem, or do you become someone else? Kit Who Bridged the Mist? Kit Who Changed the World?"

"Names in the city do not mean the same thing," Kit said absently, aware that he had said this before and not caring. "*Did I change the world?*" He knew the answer already.

She looked at him for a moment, as if trying to gauge his feelings. "Yes," she said slowly after a moment. She turned her face up toward the loose strand of bobbing lights. "There's your proof, as permanent as stone and sky."

"Permanent as stone and sky," Kit repeated. "This afternoon—it flexes a lot, the bridge. There has to be a way to control it, but it's not engineered for that yet. Or lightning could strike it. There are a thousand things that could destroy it. It's going to come down, Rasali. This year, next year, a hundred years from now, five hundred." He ran his fingers through his hair. "All these people, they think it's forever."

"No, we don't," Rasali said. "Maybe Atyar does, but we know better here. Do you need to tell a Ferry that nothing will last? These stones will fall eventually, *these* cables—but the *dream* of crossing the mist, the dream of connection. Now that we know it can happen, it will always be here. My mother died, my grandfather. Valo." She stopped, swallowed. "Ferrys die, but there is always a Ferry to cross the mist. Bridges and ferryfolk, they are not so different, Kit." She leaned forward, across the space between them, and they kissed.

"Are you off soon?"

Rasali and Kit had made love on the levee against the cold grass. They had crossed the bridge together under the sinking moons, walked back to The Deer's Heart and bought more beer, the crowds thinner now, people gone home with their families or friends or lovers: the strangers from out of town bedding down in spare rooms, tents, anywhere they could. But Kit was too restless to sleep, and he and Rasali ended up back by the mist, down on the dock. Morning was only a few hours away, and the smaller moon had set. It was darker now and the mist had dimmed.

"In a few days," Kit said, thinking of the trunks and bags packed tight and gath-

ered in his room at The Fish: the portfolio, fatter now, and stained with water, mist, dirt, and sweat. Maybe it was time for a new one. "Back to the capital."

There were lights on the opposite bank, fisherfolk preparing for the night's work despite the fair, the bridge. *Some things don't change.*

"Ah," she said. They both had known this; it was no surprise. "What will you do there?"

Kit rubbed his face, feeling stubble under his fingers, happy to skip that small ritual for a few days. "Sleep for a hundred years. Then there's another bridge they want, down at the mouth of the river, a place called Ulei. The mist's nearly a mile wide there. I'll start midwinter maybe."

"A mile," Rasali said. "Can you do it?"

"I think so. I bridged this, didn't I?" His gesture took in the beams, the slim stone tower overhead, the woman beside him. She smelled sweet and salty. "There are islands by Ulei, I'm told. Low ones. That's the only reason it would be possible. So maybe a series of flat stone arches, one to the next. You? You'll keep building boats?"

"No." She leaned her head back and he felt her face against his ear. "I don't need to. I have a lot of money. The rest of the family can build boats, but for me that was just what I did while I waited to cross the mist again."

"You'll miss it," Kit said. It was not a question.

Her strong hand laid over his. "Mmm," she said, a sound without implication.

"But it was the *crossing* that mattered to you, wasn't it?" Kit said, realizing it. "Just as with me, but in a different way."

"Yes," she said, and after a pause: "So now I'm wondering: how big do the Big Ones get in the Mist Ocean? And what else lives there?"

"Nothing's on the other side," Kit said. "There's no crossing something without an end."

"Everything can be crossed. Me, I think there is an end. There's a river of water deep under the Mist River, yes? And that water runs somewhere. And all the other rivers, all the lakes—they all drain somewhere. There's a water ocean under the Mist Ocean, and I wonder whether the mist ends somewhere out there, if it spreads out and vanishes and you find you are floating on water."

"It's a different element," Kit said, turning the problem over. "So you would need a boat that works through mist, light enough with that broad belly and fish-skin sheathing; but it would have to be deep-keeled enough for water."

She nodded. "I want to take a coast-skimmer and refit it, find out what's out there. Islands, Kit. Big Ones. *Huge* Ones. Another whole world maybe. I think I would like to be Rasali Ocean."

"You will come to Ulei with me?" he said, but he knew already. She *would* come, for a month or a season or a year. They would sleep tumbled together in an inn very like The Fish or The Bitch, and when her boat was finished, she would sail across the ocean, and he would move on to the next bridge or road, or he might return to the capital and a position at University. Or he might rest at last.

"I will come," she said. "For a bit."

Suddenly he felt a deep and powerful emotion in his chest, overwhelmed by everything that had happened or would happen in their lives: the changes to Nearside and Farside, the ferry's ending, Valo's death, the fact that she would leave him eventually, or that he would leave her. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm not," she said, and leaned across to kiss him, her mouth warm with sunlight and life. "It is worth it, all of it."

All those losses, but this one at least he could prevent.

"When the time comes," he said. "When you sail. I will come with you."

A fo ben, bid bont. To be a leader, be a bridge.

—Welsh proverb ○

NEXT ISSUE

DECEMBER ISSUE

A special holiday issue sporting stories about the winter season has been a semi-annual tradition at *Asimov's*, and we're delighted that this year the holiday spirit returns to the magazine with a brand new novelette by **Connie Willis**. You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll read this story on the edge of your seat as New York Theater comes alive and an aging Broadway star contends with a very unusual protégé in "All About Emily."

ALSO IN DECEMBER

New author **Suzanne Palmer** makes her *Asimov's* entrance with a wild tale about a team of xenobiologists whose accademic voyage of exploration goes all-together differently from what (most) of them expected; new author **Ken Liu** offers us a heart-breaking mystery about a young boy making sense of the world in "The Countable"; **Pamela Sagent** looks at a group of children growing up in the fifties and reveals the truth behind "Strawberry Birdies"; in his devastating new story, **Ferrett Steinmetz** shows us why it's a good idea to move quickly when " 'Run,' Bakri Says"; with his usual sardonic humor, **Tim McDaniel** demonstrates why a certain element would go to any length to get a hold of "The List"; and in a poignant visit to the future **Steve Rasnic Tem** discovers that there's more than one type of "Ephemera."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" investigates "The Strange Case of the Patagonian Giants" and we'll have **Peter Heck's** "On Books" column, plus an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our December issue on sale at newsstands on October 4, 2011. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle, *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, *ebook store.sony.com's* eReader and from *Zinio.com*!

COMING SOON

new stories by **Elizabeth Bear**, **Paul McAuley**, **Ken Liu**, **Kit Reed**, **Jack McDevitt**, **Rudy Rucker** & **Eileen Gunn**, **David Ira Cleary**, **Tom Purdom**, **Zachary Jernigan**, **C.W. Johnson**, **Bruce McAllister** & **Barry Malzberg**, and many others!

INSIDE/OUTSIDE

ANATHEM,
by Neal Stephenson
\$9.99, Harper Collins, \$9.99
ISBN: 0061982482

THE ROAD,
by Cormac McCarthy
Knopf, \$7.99
ISBN: 0307267458

THE LOST SYMBOL
by Dan Brown,
Doubleday, \$9.99
ISBN: 0385533136

SUPER SAD TRUE LOVE STORY,
by Gary Shteyngart
Random House, \$9.99
ISBN: 067960359X

By the time J. Edgar Hoover reached mandatory Federal retirement age, it was well-known that the long-time FBI Director had become an ominous nutcase with the dirty goods on many people, including the political high and mighty. Lyndon Johnson was president, and it was assumed that he, like many of the denizens of Washington, would heave a sigh of relief as he handed Hoover the gold watch on his way out the door.

Instead, LBJ made a special exception and kept Hoover on as head of the Bureau. When asked why he had done such a thing, Johnson replied: "Better inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in."

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, publishing, literature, and "SF" find themselves in revolutionary times, in part thrust there by technological developments—and how perfectly science fictional that would sound leading off a story in John W. Campbell's *Astounding*.

But this really *is* the second decade of

the twenty-first century, and the times they really *are* a-changing. Publishing is being changed by ebooks and ebook readers like Kindle, Nook, and the iPad, the literary content of the product can hardly be immune from bottom-line changes, and science fiction, by its very nature, cannot escape being up there on the line of scrimmage, for better or for worse, whether it likes it or not.

The four novels under consideration here are *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, *The Lost Symbol* by Dan Brown, *Anathem* by Neal Stephenson, and *Super Sad True Love Story* by Gary Shteyngart, and that it itself tells a multiplex revolutionary tale. I read them all on my Nook.

I received none of them as review copies. I bought them all as ebooks with my own money.

For those of you for whose beer money we critics compete and who must be constrained to shell it out for your literary entertainment, will it really come as a shock when I say that we reviewers expect freebies to review from publishers competing for our attention?

I have upon rare occasion bought books because their publishers did not grace me with copies or galleys, but I wanted to review them anyway. But I had never ever written one of these columns entirely about books I had to pay for. Which, of course, I hope will never happen again. Which, of course, I know damn well will.

And until now, I've never before reviewed a novel I read as an ebook, and in this essay I'm doing nothing but. And this is something I think I'm going to be doing a lot of in the future, and I won't be complaining about that at all.

As a reader of literature outside the commercial SF genre, I do have to pay my own way, and have always been parsimonious about buying hardcover copies of

what I wanted to read for my own personal enjoyment and/or edification for twenty-five dollars and up. This Scroogy attitude is probably exacerbated by all the free copies I'm inundated with of stuff that goes for the same prices, but which just isn't the sort of stuff I want to read.

But epubublishing and retailing, by fits and starts, here doing it right, there being exploitatively and foolishly greedy against enlightened self-interest, are changing my attitude, and I believe are in the process of changing the attitude of readers in general with finite budgets who have to balance wanting to read what they want to read *right now* with how many right-now editions they can afford to buy.

All of that is gone into at far greater length than I can burden you with here in *The Publishing Death Spiral* and *The Future of eBooks Is Now* on my blogsite Norman Spinrad At Large (<http://norman-spinradatlarge.blogspot.com/>). For present purposes, the point is that all the novels under consideration here were launched as hardcovers for twenty-five dollars or more, yet all of the ebook editions sell for the same price as the trade paperback reprints and sometimes a lot less, and are out there just as fast. Meaning at any time in the publication cycle readers of ebook editions are going to get more titles to read for the same money.

Three electronic cheers for that!

It means that even a critic who in fact not only gets freebies inside the genre tent but gets *paid* for reading them will look around more freely at what may be relevant to larger literary matters outside the genre tent, the boundaries of which are swiftly eroding.

None of the four novels under consideration are what we think of as genre "science fiction," which is why they never came in over my transom as review copies. But all of them are not only literally speculative fiction, not only even arguably science fiction, but perhaps, taken together, a clade of speciating literary vectors that arguably may replace "science fiction" entirely.

Or vice versa?

None of these four novels are mimetic contemporary tales; none of them are fantasies, since they do at least attempt to more or less stay within the known laws of mass and energy—or in the case of *Anathem*, argue its way around them and through them with geeky rubber cosmology. So if one reverses figure and ground to define science fiction by what everything else is not, they have to be SF because there's nothing else for them to be.

I bought an ebook edition of *The Road* with no thought of wanting to review it because Cormac McCarthy is an establishment literary lion, the novel is set in a post-apocalypse future, and it received such laudatory attention in what's left of the establishment literary press as a novelist in my existential position would sell at least a collateralized debt obligation on his soul for. I had previously bought the ebook of *Super Sad True Love Story* because the coverage in the more or less same PR environment promised a fun read, and because this non-genre SF novel was set in some sort of gonzo near-future.

Only after having read both the Shteyngart and McCarthy did I realize that both of them were science fiction, and not even merely speculative fiction, by any coherent literary definition. And that from a proprietary genre point of view, these guys were standing outside the genre tent.

But were they pissing in or knocking on the door, to flagrantly mix two metaphors in a single sentence? The only thing that seemed clear was that something mutationally general was going on.

Only then was my curiosity drawn to *The Lost Symbol*, a sort of sequel by the author of the monstrous best-seller *The Da Vinci Code*, which I had read for lack of anything else in English to be found in an apartment in Paris where Dona and I were staying. This is what one could only call the kind of contemporary paranoid present tense historical thriller that insists that it's realistic by shoe-horning itself inside the physical laws of mass and energy, however loosely it plays with everything else.

And is this not another functional definition of science fiction if ever there was one? And has not Dan Brown gotten filthy rich writing it? And does it not make sense for those of us writing science fiction without attaining his lofty commercial eminence to try to figure out why? Particularly since *The Lost Symbol* is, in literary terms, a real stinker, much more so than *The Da Vinci Code*.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, it was the Catholic Church getting the expose the machinations of the Illuminati of the Month treatment, via a search to crack the secret encoded in the Mona Lisa that exfoliates into a derring-do thriller via an academic expert forced by fictional necessity to do the derring, à la a reluctant Indiana Jones.

Unless you've just returned from the ex-planet Pluto, you don't need me to tell you that it was an enormous commercial success, but maybe you do need me to confess, if that is the proper word, that I rather enjoyed it. Hey, Leonardo, Opus Dei, a homicidal albino monk, the Holy Grail, the hidden secret life of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, the Roman Catholic Church fighting for its life well outside the rules of the Marquis of Queensberry—pretty hard to not be gripped by such material, and Dan Brown writes proficiently if not with high literary ambition.

But did Brown really believe this stuff? Could it really be *true*? Was that why some Church officials expressed their displeasure? Was not putting these thoughts bouncing around the heads of readers and paranoid pop culture part of its appeal?

Whatever, Dan, any agent worth his commission would have told Brown, since *The Da Vinci Code* earned out so much above the advance we got on it, your publisher is slaving to lay out much more for the advance on a sequel.

Voila, *The Lost Symbol*! Same lead hero, but this time it's the Freemasons, particularly the Founding Fathers of the United States of America, the CIA, and Noetics, a science fictional science of consciousness reminiscent of Scientology

presented without the sardonic wink of an L. Ron Hubbard.

And the venue in which the action—and there is plenty of that—takes place is not millennial Rome or Paris with the atmospheres that implies, but the mythical cityscape secretly created as Washington, D.C.

Washington's architecture and decor as the creation of the Freemason Conspiracy of the Founding Fathers? George Washington as Prometheus? Human thought manipulating and creating reality because collectively it has some cock-eyed quantum mass?

Come on, Dan!

Do you really believe this stuff?

But hey, there really is a pyramid with an all-seeing eye atop it on the dollar bill, the Founding Fathers really *were* mostly Masons, as was George Washington, and some of this stuff seems well-researched and credible. There are probably as many or more people who believe in this incarnation of the Secret Masters of the world's reality as believe in the Men in Black and the alien corpses in Hangar 51 and Timothy Leary's *Curse of the Oval Office* combined.

Could it really be true?

Well, there's the nature of Dan Brown's secret formula, and an utterly science fictional technique it is, as I should know quite well, having myself applied it to both the historical past and, like Brown, what might be called the speculative present. What you do is use the gaps, contradict nothing that is verifiably true, which lets you play freely with everything else.

It's a most useful literary technique. You can't write immediate-future speculative fiction ("anticipation" as the French call it to distinguish it from "science fiction" because the speculative element need not involve science or technology at all) or historical fiction or hard science fiction without employing it. Dan Brown has it down cold in the speculative present, and in *The Da Vinci Code* it worked well for him.

He uses it to good effect again in *The Lost Symbol*, but there he also employs a

coldly cynical story-telling technique to keep the reader turning the pages without finding a good stopping point to place a bookmark and reading at warp speed to create the illusion of a breathlessly thrilling lead.

He does this with short chapters, most ending just after the viewpoint character learns something important but withholds what it is from the reader by cutting away to another viewpoint character and doing the same thing again.

And again, and again, and again, throughout most of the novel.

Well, you pays your money, and you takes your choice. I say this is a manipulative cheat, and an obnoxious one. Once you perceive it, the thrill is gone away into the clunky clockwork machinery. On the other hand, maybe readers who don't perceive the carney move will enjoy the roller coaster ride.

Or not. *The Lost Symbol* got unenthusiastic reviews, made the top of the best-seller lists, but didn't sell anything like *The Da Vinci Code*. Given the expectations, it could be considered a flop, at least by the publisher that shelled out a huge advance based on past Bookscan numbers for another cash cow and got one whose inky milk bled red.

What Dan Brown demonstrates with *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Lost Symbol* is that you can enthrall a general mass readership that turns its nose up at "sci-fi" with fiction set in a speculative present, where everything that can be verified is set in the reality that those readers know and the speculative elements are presented as hiding within that matrix. Especially if that chosen matrix seems to have plenty of hidey-holes for Secret Masters and theological and/or political secrets whose existence cannot be logically or emotionally disproved.

This fiction of the speculative present is certainly speculative fiction, but is it science fiction? Contend that it is not, and you will have to concoct a literary definition that excludes it. What does it lack, when done right? What does it do that it shouldn't?

This is of more than mere academic hair-splitting interest because the speculative present is likely to supersede or at least dominate the speculative futures of "science fiction," and for a general readership has just about done it already.

The operative question is really can "science fiction" welcome it into the fold, can writers whose work has evolved within the genre parameters of "science fiction" adapt to this mode and use what they have learned in the process—which is plenty—or will it be left to the Dan Browns to reinvent the speculative wheel?

I mean, pondering my own vector, I see that my novels were moving in this direction long before I even understood that it *was* a direction, starting with *Bug Jack Barron*, proceeding through *Passing Through the Flame*, *The Mind Game*, *Pictures at 11*, *He Walked Among Us*, and maybe arguably more.

This I was doing while certain other writers were arguing about whether they should "leave science fiction" as rats escape from a sinking boat. Did I "leave science fiction"? Certainly I was never enthusiastic about this stream of my work being published in genre SF lines, where it didn't really belong in terms of marketing demographics.

But while I was writing this sort of stuff, I was also writing things like *Songs From the Stars*, *Riding the Torch*, *Child of Fortune*, and *The Void Captain's Tale*, which I knew damned well could only and should only be published as science fiction. Because only people on familiar terms with that literature could have the intellectual tools to understand, let alone enjoy, fiction set in the far future, and dealing with such material as mutated consciousness and human destiny in a galactic context.

Was I missing something here? Pondering that question and deciding thereby to write this column, I decided that I had to first read *Anathem*.

Why?

Because Neal Stephenson had begun well inside the tent of science fiction both commercially and literarily with novels

like *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age*, but successfully snake-danced out of the tent and into the speculative past circa World War II with *Cryptonomicon*. He solidified his escape from singular genre restraints with a kind of historical fantasy trilogy called *The Baroque Cycle*.

Not many "science fiction writers" have pulled off this Houdini act to reach a wider and more general readership while still more or less faithful to their own literary stars. But from what I had read about *Anathem*, it seemed like a novel that could only be comprehended by, let alone be of any interest to, the hard-core cognoscenti, set as it is in an alien civilization on a planet far far away in time, space, and the taste of any but a committed science fiction readership.

¿Que pasa?

Stephenson prefaces the novel with this Note to the Reader:

"If you are accustomed to reading works of speculative fiction and enjoy puzzling things out on your own, skip this Note. Otherwise, know that the scene in which this book is set is not Earth, but a planet called Arbe that is similar to Earth in many ways."

He then proceeds to pages of Arbe pronunciation guides and a Cliff Notes guide to the rises and falls of thousands of years of civilizations on his fictional planet before even beginning the story.

Well, this certainly seems like trying to prepare a naive and wider readership to sail the starry sea of science fiction, a cunning means of persuading it to take a flyer on this novel. But those who do will find themselves light years, multiplex realities, and consciousnesses from Kansas.

The first person narrator and lead character of *Anathem* is Erasmus, a sort of monk in a sort of monastery, though as the song says, neither of them are quite what they seem. Stephenson leaves you encapsulated "intramuros" with Erasmus in the only context he has known since childhood, and all you know of Arbe, for a long leisurely while in this long leisurely and sometimes a wee over-ly discursive novel before he and you es-

cape, flee, or are ejected into the wider world outside the walls. And it's not exactly what you expected it to be, Dorothy.

Inside, the "fraas" do a kind of theoretical science cum existential philosophical calculus in a millennial attempt to understand life, the universe and everything by talking about it, pondering it, engaging in debates and logical jousts, and regarding material phenomenology as mere data, though one may engage aspects of the material world as hobbies.

The feeling is cloistered Middle Ages, and the "dialogs" deliberately Socratic, often overlong even to a reader who does find such stuff fascinating. What someone will make of reading *Anathem* as their first immersion in this hardest of hard science fiction, I can't even imagine. But it does make sense if you can fathom it, and it will end up being crucial to the story.

Until Erasmus leaves the intramuros world, you are led by the monastery-like culture, steampunk level technology, and even the literary style to believe that outside the walls is some kind of medieval age, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Extramuros, they do pragmatic science and technology, high, low, civilian, and military, and through millennia of sine wave ups and downs have evolved a high tech civilization rather more advanced than our own, with things like smart phones, an internet, helicopters, satellites, mini-nukes called "Everything Killers," ballistic missiles, and, as it turns out, very sophisticated low Arbe orbit manned capabilities.

You could take this set-up as a take on the dichotomy between theoretical and experimental physics, science and mathematized cosmological philosophy like string theory, cosmic Cartesian dualism, or all of the above.

And when some sort of alien spaceship is discovered secretly orbiting the planet and Erasmus gets more and more involved in the efforts of The Powers That Be to discover its nature and intentions, the novel itself bifurcates along two different vectors.

Discovering what the alien spaceship is, who the aliens are, where they came from, and what they want, is a fascinating tale and intellectual puzzle, delving deeply into the possible nature of multiplex universes and a definitive theory of universal consciousness. Vaporware, maybe, but way cool and logically vigorous vaporware. About as deep into hard scientific speculation as you can get, and brilliantly pulled off by Neal Stephenson.

Stephenson does stepwise peel the layers of maya off his cosmological onion to reveal his at least literarily satisfying version of ultimate reality, as such mystical hard SF should. But this fades more and more into the background in about the last quarter or so of this long novel, which devolves into seemingly endless space commando high tech derring-do.

What happened here?

Like the novel itself, the readership demographic Stephenson seems to be writing for appears to bifurcate somewhere past the excellent first two-thirds of the novel, written for a scientifically sophisticated audience of veteran science fiction readers, and the final third, which descends from on high into action footage loops and nuts-and-bolts military SF.

Why Stephenson did what he did only he can really know, which doesn't mean he had to know why to do it. But that *Anathem* seems to at least have been nicely commercially viable and critically approved would appear to say something, something that on balance is positive.

I would surmise that not many readers who were intellectually seduced by the first two-thirds of *Anathem* felt all that satisfied by the handling of the denouement, and even fewer readers turned on by space war SF action were going to plow through all that geeky stuff to finally get to it. So it would seem that there still remains enough of a dwindling and perhaps aging-out demographic of sufficiently educated sophisticated readers to support the continued existence of hard-core science fiction.

After all, in a country of three hundred million people, a tiny slice of the reader-

ship pie is sufficient to make any flavor of fiction commercially viable within certain parameters. And if you're willing to accept those economic limits, you can gain the creative freedom to write for your chosen ideal readership.

Which by my lights should be yourself. Would it not be self-betrayal as well as of any potential readership, to write something you wouldn't want to read if someone else had written it?

What its practitioners are pleased to call "Literary Fiction" recognizes that it can't attract some maximum bottom-fishing bottom-line readership, and must content itself with being an elite niche genre like science fiction. It's been a long time since literary lions like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Mailer could publish fiction that was "literary" and "popular" at the same time.

The surrender of this synergy of frontline literary intellectual heroism to the creation of a duality between "literary" and "popular" may be not exactly peace with honor, but at least it does allow some niche literature like "serious" science fiction and "serious" literary fiction to survive with more or less creative freedom.

But there is a feeling abroad that the handwriting of future commercial non-viability may be on the electronic wall for both of these genres with serious literary intent. Writers inside the science fiction tent have been attempting to "break out" of the genre and into the "mainstream" for decades now in various ways and with varying success. And, the grass always looking greener from the outside, of late "serious literary writers" are trying their hands at science fiction.

The problem for science fiction writers is that attempting to address a larger audience means attracting a wider audience, and writing for a wider audience tends to dumb down the product.

The problem for literary writers is that while their sort of inward-looking fiction has no trouble being understood by a general readership, it tends to bore it because of its disconnect from cultural and mass cultural relevance.

Or, as I wrote long ago, "Science fiction treats matters of cosmic significance trivially, literary fiction applies its superior literary technique to the contemplation of the lint in its own navel."

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is at once a typical and peculiar specimen thereof. McCarthy is one of those currently rare major league novelists with a major league mass readership track record, and *The Road* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, among other lesser awards, something I find hard to understand.

Or maybe I understand too well, and am being cowardly reluctant to state what in establishment literary quarters would be regarded as Philistine lèse majesté coming from a mere "sci-fi" guy. Well, frankly, Scarlett, I don't give a damn. I might as well stand up on my hind legs and say it out loud:

The Road is superlatively written post-apocalyptic science fiction. But it is not a great novel, or indeed really a good one, and those who claim that it is are the ones who are embarrassing themselves in my eyes and in the eyes of anyone who knows what good science fiction is. Or for that matter, good fiction period.

There, I've said it.

In the first place, *The Road* is not really a novel at all, but a novella stretched out to book length. Not by the old trick of wide margins and large type, but by a newer one, a "post-modern" pretension that similarly increases the page count by padding many of the pages with white space, but in a manner counterproductive to the ease of the reading experience.

"What does he mean by that?" you might well ask.

"All I can do is demonstrate," I'm forced to admit.

"So go ahead and do it," you say.

In *The Road* style, the above three lines would be printed as:

What does he mean by that?

All I can do is demonstrate.

So go ahead and do it.

No "said's" or said-bookisms in any of the book's dialog or any other form of speaker identification, replacing them with double line spaces every time the speaker changes. And not just in short sequences but in whole pages at a time, running up the page count by halving the words per page.

Fortunately, at least there are really only two speaking parts in this book, a father and his boy; if there were more in a scene, this sort of thing would render it just about unreadable.

Neither character is graced with a name, and the author seems to maintain a psychic distance from them, alternating subtle omniscient author narration with a scattering of stream of the father's consciousness that seems rather coldly generic. He never enters the son's consciousness at all as they trudge along through Cormac McCarthy's bleak and pitiless post-apocalyptic landscape, encountering a rogue's gallery of human monsters straight out of *The Worst of Mad Max* toward inevitable entropic doom.

Th-th-th-that's all, folks, that's the whole sad content, except for a bathetic little bullshit ending that contradicts what theme *The Road* has had, which more or less amounts to "life's a bitch and then you die."

A nameless man and nameless son making their way south through the moribund landscape of a dying Earth; dying trees, dying foliage, ruined cities and towns, birds falling dead from the sky, the biosphere itself seemingly well on the road to extinction without a ray of hope.

McCarthy is very good at physical description, and would seem to have done his homework, because he's quite meticulous about getting the nuts and bolts of everything not only well-described, sometimes over-described, but correct in the manner of a conscientious hard science fiction writer. Indeed, *The Road* would be a successful little piece of hard science fiction, at least in technical terms, except for one not at all minor flaw.

Cormac McCarthy never enlightens the reader as to what has happened to create his post-apocalypse Hades. Nuclear war? Global warming? An asteroid strike? Escaped aliens from Hangar 51 taking vengeance on Gaia? Not only does McCarthy never tell you, he probably doesn't know himself—because the world he has created doesn't really jibe with being created by any or even all of the above. He probably didn't care either.

Talented writers who misunderstand science fiction have often fallen into this trap, supposing that writing in the SF mode allows you to invent whatever literary world suits your purpose without regard to suspension of disbelief or scientific knowledge, and sometimes it even works.

But you do have to have a purpose, a theme, a didactic ax to grind, a revelation to convey—something, anything, that pulls together your series of events, uniting character evolution with dramatic structure and with philosophical vector to reach a satisfying conclusion for the reader, an epiphany, if you're really on your game, even a satori.

There is a technical term for this.

It's called a story.

Because it doesn't have that sort of literary or transliterary purpose, *The Road* doesn't tell a story. Because it doesn't have a story to tell. And I suspect that Cormac McCarthy didn't care to write a novel that told a story, but wrote the novel as a literary exercise.

Stories arise somewhere below the intellectual surface of consciousness—the subconscious, the collective unconscious, the dreamtime, the zeitgeist—and you know when one arises from the vasty deeps because it grabs you with the grappling iron of emotion, and will do the same for the reader if you're up to the task of conveying it.

Stories call you. There's no guarantee they'll come when you call, and when they don't, the tendency is to try harder and harder against the zen of it, and when that doesn't work, to intellectualize a literary exercise like *The Road*.

To a certain extent this is as good a definition of Post Modernism as any, and not just in literature—and it turns off many readers, or, to put it the other way around, really turns on few. Such literary exercises, if well executed, are easy to admire, but not at all easy to love.

That something like *The Road* won the Pulitzer Prize when there were any number of much better novels published in the same year even from within the tent of science fiction is a sad and frightening commentary on the state of American serious literature—that is, of a literary culture that takes itself so seriously that it can't bother itself with true story telling, and looks down its patrician nose at writers who do. And therefore at any readership beyond its own circumscribed fan base.

Perhaps, in a way like science fiction writers turning to things like the speculative present to reach beyond their own circumscribed fan base, literary lions like John Updike, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy have dabbled with much the same thing, or so least they imagine, in an effort to restore some culturally relevant grandeur or purpose to their work, to recapture the magic that seems to have gone away with Hemingway, Robert Penn Warren, Mark Twain, Norman Mailer.

Perhaps they have noticed that members of the club who rarely wrote anything like science fiction are best known for the science fiction they did write. Aldous Huxley for *Brave New World*, George Orwell for *1984*, Anthony Burgess for *A Clockwork Orange*, for the most conspicuous examples.

Why can't we do likewise? they may tell themselves. Why can't we apply our more serious and sophisticated literary concerns and powers to this mother lode of thematic riches and colorful back-grounds and rescue it from the sci-fi hacks and ourselves from post-modern creative stagnation?

Well, they generally don't fare too well because they generally don't understand that science fiction as literary exercise

without a meaningful story to tell is generally as flat as last week's tortillas.

But when this sort of attempt to meld the virtues of "serious literature" with those of science fiction is done right from both ends of the spectrum, the whole can transcend the sum of its parts, and you can get something like *Super Sad True Love Story* by Gary Shteyngart.

Shteyngart is the son of a Jewish Russian family who emigrated to the United States in his youth. This background is certainly relevant to not only his ability but perhaps his desire to write something like *Super Sad True Love Story*, and maybe even to what literary vector his career might take.

He grew up as a boy in the Soviet Union, in Russia, where, rather than twentieth-century science fiction evolving as a species of commercial low-brow schlock—since such a thing was not possible in the Soviet Union where—science fiction was ipso facto published by "official publishing houses" along with everything else (aside from underground samizdat).

But science fiction, being what it inherently was, also had a kind of sub-rosa function as political satire and/or protest screed. Because if you were careful, you could get away with encoding it in tales that after all are not set in the Soviet Union of today, Commissar, but on an alien planet in the future, far, far away.

If you were careful. If Soviet science fiction writers overstepped the bounds, it could become a seriously counterproductive career move, which it sometime did.

So Russian science fiction evolved in a rather surreal political context, and in a different tent a kind of Russian Magic Realism that was playing something of the same game with fantasy was long regarded as a cutting edge of "serious literature." So when the commissars metamorphosed into acquisition editors, the boundaries between the two were a good deal more porous than in the US, and in the minds of a certain literate readership, too.

On the other side of the literary lineage, in the United States, the novel of

urban Jewish sexual angst à la Philip Roth is very much in the mainstream of serious establishment literature, and Shteyngart, born into a family of Russian Jewish immigrants, has naturally embraced and been embraced by that tradition, too.

Lenny Abramov, the primary lead in *Super Sad True Love Story*, is himself the son of Russian Jewish immigrants in New York, with all that implies as rich material for a family side to the story, which Shteyngart portrays in full detail with characteristic sardonic but empathetic realistic humor.

Lenny's inamorata, obsession, non-jailbait Lolita, is Eunice Park, a Korean-American post-teen pop tart. Perhaps the most amazing feat in this novel is how deeply and intimately Shteyngart presents both first generation traditionalist Korean-American family culture and the electronically multiplexed super style and consumer-brand obsessed culture of their jacked-in mall rat daughter.

So where's the science fiction in this tale of two generations of two different and also somewhat amusingly similar immigrant families?

Well, this story—and true story it certainly is—takes place in a New York perhaps not as far in the future as we would like it to be, when the economically and financially collapsed United States, fighting a losing war in Venezuela, is deep into the process of being turned into a Third World banana republic by its Chinese creditors and Venezuelan and Norwegian gunboat diplomacy.

And no, this is not satire, this is all too credible on an extrapolation level, this is serious science fiction, well-thought-out and realistically rendered. Then, too, Lenny's job is that of a high-end salesman for a company promising eternally renewable life in the near future to the well-enough heeled and its own elite employees who keep enough clients forking over for expensive temporary measures in the indefinite meantime.

Something like Scientology rebooted as the Foundation For Human Immortality

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out of *Bug Jack Barron*, peddling not cryogenic freezing to get the wealthy there, but endless and endlessly expensive medical treatments and sophisticated genetically engineered snake-oil nostrums.

Gary Shteyngart not only brings all these threads together in the end, they reinforce each other, as they should, making *Super Sad True Love Story* a whole that is synergistically greater than the mere sum of its parts.

This is a novel infinitely more worthy of a Pulitzer than something like *The Road*, and probably more worthy of a Nebula than anything published in the relevant year, too. Written by a writer

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

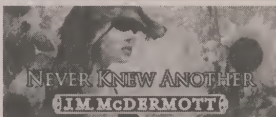
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who seems by the text to see no more contradiction in this than I do.

Is this a one-shot by a writer whose main aspiration lies along a narrower vector toward being accepted as an establishment literary lion, or contrawise a nascent science fiction writer who seeks not to pass this synergetic way again?

One hopes not. One hopes neither. One hopes that such a complete and completely rounded novel is a harbinger of the future of American literature.

The future work of Gary Shteyngart, the direction his career will take, will surely be indicative of what that future will be. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Another WorldCon has come and gone, and the convention year starts over. My best bets in September are out west: CopperCon, ConJecture, Foolscape and VCon. In October, come east for CapClave and Albacon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

SEPTEMBER 2011

- 2-5—**DragonCon**. For info, write: Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. Or phone: (770) 909-0115 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) dragoncon.org. (E-mail) info@dragoncon.org. Con will be held in: Atlanta GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hyatt. Guests will include: the usual media suspects (Shatner, Nimoy, Mulgrew, etc.), but also McCaffrey, Sawyer, Zahn, etc. Thousands expected.
- 2-5—**CopperCon**. casfs.org. Hilton, Avondale AZ. Carrie Vaughn, Janni Lee Simmer, Adam Niswander. General SF/fantasy convention.
- 9-11—**ConJecture**. 2011.conjecture.org. Hilton Inn, Mission Valley CA. Allen Steele. "SF and fantasy, with emphasis on literature."
- 15-18—**BoucherCon**. bouchercon2011.com. Renaissance Grand Hotel, St. Louis MO. The world convention for mystery-fiction fans.
- 16-18—**ConStellation**. Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. (256) 270-0092. con-stellation.org. Holiday Inn Express.
- 16-18—**Foolscape**. Box 2461, Seattle WA 98111. foolscapcon.org. Marriott, Redmond WA. Chiang, Woodring. SF/fantasy books/art.
- 16-18—**Great New England Steampunk Exhibition**. Box 362, Hampstead NH 03841. tgnese.com. Fitchburg MA. S. Lee & S. Miller.
- 16-18—**MonsterMania**. monstermania.net. Crowne Plaza, Timonium (Baltimore) MD. S. Cunningham, A. Lehman, more. Horror media.
- 16-18—**Intervention**. interventioncon.com. Hilton, Rockville MD (near DC). Webcomics, and other people who live on the Internet.
- 22-24—**Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia**. Box 52, Whiteford MD 21160. mmargrajr@hotmail.com. Hunt Valley MD. "Salute to Buck Rogers."
- 24—**Roc-Con**. rochesterscfanimecon.com. Main Street Armory, Rochester NY. J. G. Hertzler, Gresh, Skeates. Media SF and anime.
- 30-Oct. 2—**VCon**. Box 78069, Vancouver BC V5N 5W1. vcon.ca. Sheraton Airport. G. Benford, Jean-Pierre Normand, L. Lassek.

OCTOBER 2011

- 1—**MonsterFest**. monsterfestva.com. Central Library, Chesapeake VA. "A Celebration of Classic Horror in Films and Literature."
- 6-9—**Sirens**. Box 149, Sedalia CA 93135. sirensconference.org. Cascade Resort, Vail CO. Larbalestier. Women in fantasy literature.
- 7-9—**AkiCon**. akicon.org. Info@akicon.org. Hilton, Bellevue WA. Kyle Herbert, Velocity Demos, NDP Comics. Anime.
- 14-16—**CapClave**. c/o Box 53, Ashton MD 20861. capclave.org. Hilton, Gaithersburg MD. Vaughn, Valente. Written SF/fantasy.
- 21-23—**AlbaCon**. Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. albacon.org. Best Western Sovereign. J. Kessler, S. Hickman, K. Decandido, Wombat.
- 21-23—**Browncoat Ball**. browncoatball.com. Providence RI. "A Mighty Fine Shindig." For fans of Firefly and Serenity.
- 27-30—**World Fantasy Con**. wfc2011.org. Town & Country Resort, San Diego CA. Gaiman, Godwin. "Sailing the Sea of Imagination."
- 29—**Goblins & Gears Masquerade Ball**. teamwench.org. Michael's Eighth Avenue, Glen Burnie (Baltimore) MD. Horror and steampunk.

NOVEMBER 2011

- 4-6—**NekoCon**. Box 7568, Roanoke VA 24019. nekocon.com. Hampton Roads VA. Anime and steampunk.
- 4-6—**ConTraflow**. Box 57927, New Orleans LA 70157. contraflowscifi.org. Clarion Westbank. General SF and fantasy convention.
- 18-20—**PhilCon**. Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. phildon.org. Crowne Plaza, Cherry Hill NJ. Doctorow. Celebrating 75 years.
- 18-20—**SFContario**. 151 Gamma, Toronto ON M8W 4G3. sfcontario.ca. Ramada Plaza. John Scalzi, Gardner Dozois, Karl Schroeder.
- 18-20—**Anime USA**. animeusa.org. Hyatt, Crystal City VA (near DC). Laura Bailey, Trina Nishimura, Travis Willingham, DJ Sisen.
- 25-27—**DarkoverCon**. Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. darkovercon.org. Near Baltimore MD. Music and alternative spirituality.
- 25-27—**LosCon**. 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. loscon.org. LAX Marriott, Los Angeles CA. J. de Chancie, J. Hertz.

DECEMBER 2011

- 2-4—**SMOFCon**. smofcon29.org. Park Plaza Victoria Hotel, Amsterdam, Netherlands. Where con organizers meet to talk shop.

AUGUST 2012

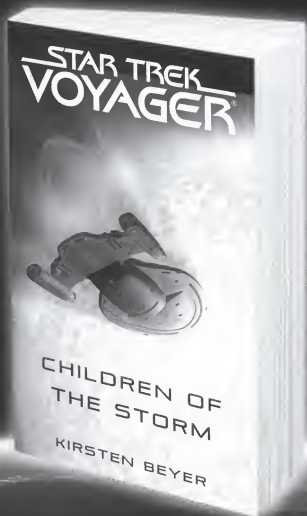
- 30-Sep. 3—**Chlcon** 7, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076. chlcon.org. Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrill, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$155+.

AUGUST 2013

- 29-Sep. 2—**Texas in 2013**, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. texas2013.org. San Antonio TX. WorldCon.

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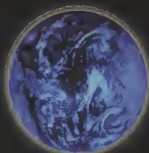
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